

NATIVES OF MILTON

R. MURRAY GILCHRIST

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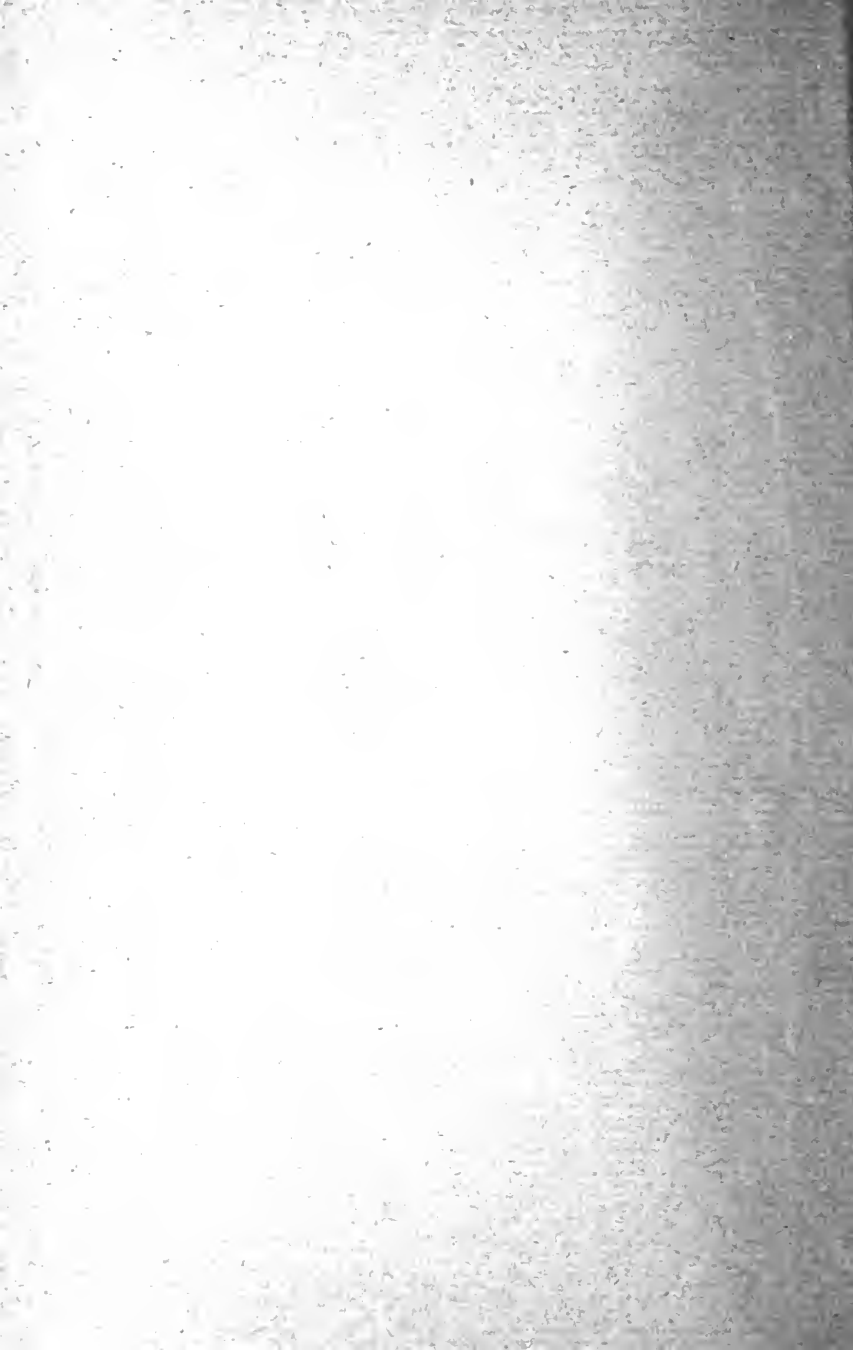
to knock, called Arnold,

from

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Dec: 6th 1902.

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NATIVES OF MILTON

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NATIVES OF MILTON

BY

R. MURRAY GILCHRIST

AUTHOR OF

"THE COURTESY DAME," "THE RUE BARGAIN"

"NICHOLAS AND MARY," ETC.

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TO MY

DEAR FRIEND

ROSE DERRY

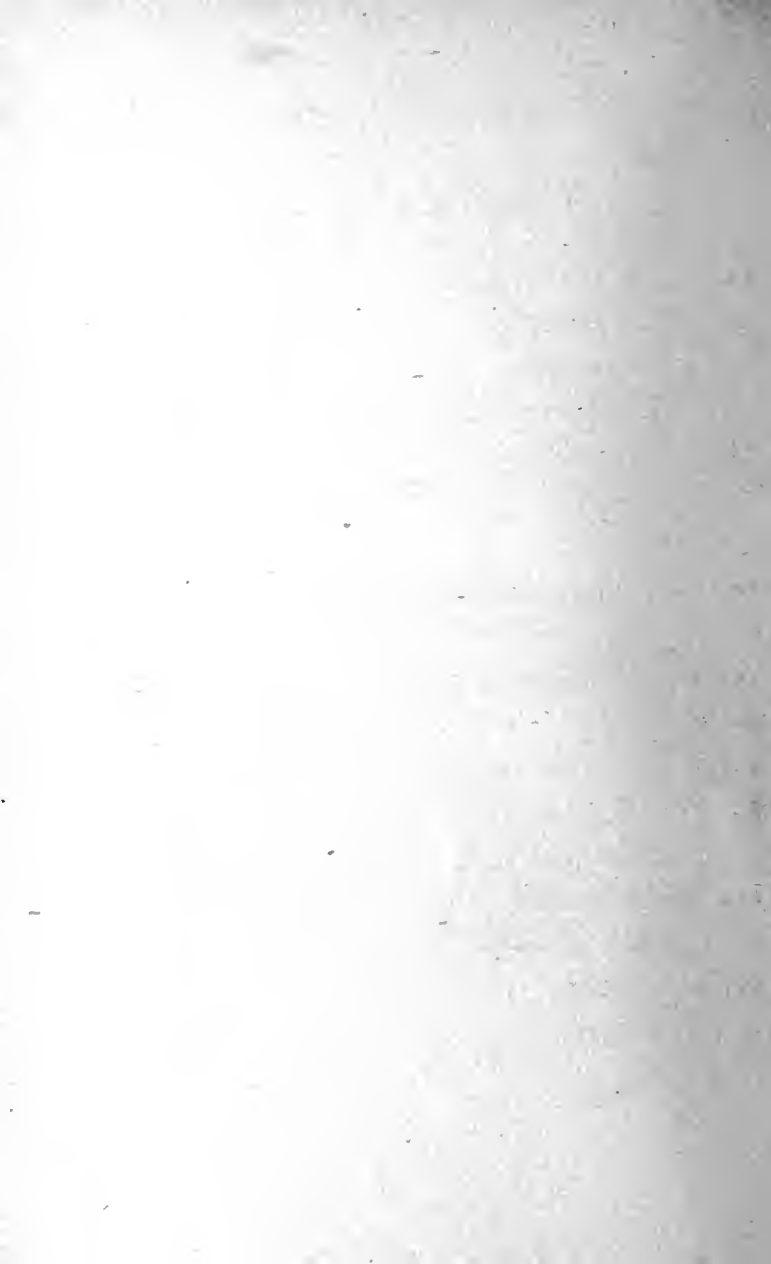
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THE RETURN OF UNCLE JOB

It was the last evening of Milton Wakes, and Sarah Posnett's cottage (which stands facing the ivy-covered parsonage, midway between the "Bold Cloudesley" and the "Marquis of Granby") bore a candle in each of its brightly-polished lower windows. Eight o'clock had struck, and the dusk concealed the rain-drenched asters and stocks of the forecourt. Indoors, all was warmth and comfort; a big fire burned in the grate, and the round table, where the spinster sat with her two widowed sisters, who had come down from their upland farms, was covered with flowered china and spice and buttermilk cakes.

Sarah was in her element, for this was her special feast-evening. On all other occasions when the sisters met, it was in the comfortable parlours of the hill-top homesteads; for, although her income was quite sufficient for her simple requirements, they had been amply portioned by their deceased spouses, and when entertaining her they were apt to imply that she must consider herself honoured by the offer of a seat near the door. But,

THE RETURN OF UNCLE JOB

at the Wakes, when she bestirred herself to give them of her best, they relaxed their social pride and treated her as an equal. The two elder women belonged to a different type—they had the pallid, large-nosed faces of the Bradshaw family (it is well-known that the last Squire was wayward, and that Mrs Posnett bore a repute for lightness, as her spouse did for blind simplicity), and the sisters, without ever speaking of their mother's frailty, joyed in the knowledge of better blood. But Sarah, with her homely ways and her beaming pippin-like face, was a true daughter of the Peakland peasantry.

"Gin for yo', Louey, an' rum for Hannah," said the spinster. "Now, tell me when to stop?" She poured a goodly measure of gin into the tea, until the cup was brimful.

"Dear! dear!" exclaimed Louisa Dane. "I always did say as yo've gotten a heavy hand, Sarah, wench! Yor hospitality's very good. An' the sperrit's as it owt to be."

"Ay, fill mine up to the top," said Hannah Cocker, laughingly. "I'm none o' them who cry 'enew!' when the pot'll howd no more. Stephen, poor lad, always upheld it as theree weere nowt like rum an' tea. Wy, yo're temperate as e'er, Sarah—yo're none takin' ony!"

"No, loove," replied Sarah. "Mine's a yead-piece as soon creaks. Now, yo're surely a'

THE RETURN OF UNCLE JOB

whöame here, an' all as is on the table mun be eaten."

After the second cup the paleness of the widows disappeared; the tightly-drawn skin of their cheeks flushed warmly and their handsome teeth were freely displayed. They began to talk briskly of the lovers whom they had dismissed in their youth, and of junketings at distant fairs. Sarah was too much their junior to remember these fine doings; but she sat listening, with her eyes sparkling and her lips twitching in sympathy.

Mrs Dane turned soon and slapped her smartly on the bosom. "Yo' little mouse!" she cried. "Yo're just as plump an' firm o' flesh as yo' weere at twenty, when owd William Brierly o' th' 'Rose an' Crown,' poggled after thee like a God-knows whatten. An' yo' weere that close, yo' ne'er let out how yo' gied him th' mitten."

"Well," said Sarah, bashfully, "he's been dead for fifteen year, so I need mak' no secret o't. He came into the brewhouse, where I weere cruddlin' soome milk for the turkey-powts, an' he slipped a lozinse i' my hand an' went off. An' theere weere writin' on't:— 'When will yo' be mine?'—an' as luck would have it I had another i' my pocket wi':— 'When pigs fly' for answer. So I calls 'William!' an' he coomes, an' says I: 'This settles it.' Lord ha' mercy! but he did curse an' sweer!"

THE RETURN OF UNCLE JOB

"The owd gander!" said Mrs Cocker. "I wonder at him havin' the cheek! I do b'lieve as there's soome men as thinks they're fit for any ooman! In coorse, Sarah, yo' weerena (she passed her cup for the fifth time)—yo' weerena so ladylike as Louey an' me, but yo' weerena foul i' them days. Why, now we're talkin' about such things—only last week Artie Dobson came up to Carter Knoll an' asked me——"

She was interrupted by a timorous knocking at the door. Sarah rose hastily and lifted the latch. In the honeysuckle-covered porch stood a little bent old man with a long white beard. A trunk, covered with cowhide, lay beside—like its owner it was soaked with the heavy rain.

"Is this Miss Sarah Posnett's?" he asked, in a quavering voice. "They told me as there was only one bearing the name nowadays in the village."

"I'm Sarah Posnett," she replied. "Coomme inside out o' the rain. Whatten may yor bus'ness be?"

"That'll wait a bit," he said, with a pathetic giggle. "Why, bless me, you've got Louisa and Hannah here! I can tell 'em by their noses! And growin' old women, though I be older by twenty year!"

The widows sniffed. "If it's a pedlar, Sarah," said Louisa, "hadna he better coome when yo've no coomp'ny?"

THE RETURN OF UNCLE JOB

"I'm no pedlar," said the stranger, "and I'm tired with a long journey. Outside Cowper's 'bus isn't the place for one of my time of life. Getting on for eighty-two I be."

Sarah Posnett motioned for him to take her own easy-chair. "Set yo' down," she said, "an' warm yorsen. I'll mak yo' a fresh pot o' tea. Be yo' a native o' these parts?"

For reply the old man drew off one of his black woollen gloves, and held a thumbless hand within a few inches of Mrs Cocker's face. The widow gave a loud cry of surprise, then sprang to her feet.

"'Tis Uncle Job, coome back from Australy!" she declared. "Well, o' all the wonders!"

The gaffer chuckled as his eyes passed from face to face. "Ay, Uncle Job it is. And you two wenches, Hannah and Louey, stood by my side in the churchyard whiles I buried my thumb in a silver snuff-box. I'd got it cut clean off in the turnip chopper. Sarah wasn't there, bein' a babby at the breast."

Thus did Uncle Job, who had emigrated half-a-century ago, and who was reputed to have won a large fortune on a colonial sheep-farm, return to his English kinsfolk. As he sipped his tea, big tears rolled down his cheeks and his lips trembled, for the past came back to him in a flood.

THE RETURN OF UNCLE JOB

"Lawful case!" he murmured. "But for as we've growed old folk, it might have been only yesterday that I went away! And now you're as glad to see me as you can be."

"Ay, that we be," said Louisa Dane. "An' mark yo, yo've gotten to mak' yer whöame wi' me, bein' as I'm the eldest, an' weere yor favourite as a bairn, so to speak."

"Yo' always want everything, Louey," said Hannah, warmly. "'Twill be better for him to coome to me. My house is sheltered wi' trees, an' theer's more warmth for him wi' us. Why, the childer'll be off theer yeads at the thowt."

"A man o' my uncle's years doesna want botherin' wi' yor gran'childer," interrupted Louisa. "I ne'er bred—God be thank!—the more childer, th' more sorrow! I've gotten a quiet hearth-nook."

To prevent further dispute, Sarah interposed with: "Yo'ld best tak' him turn an' turn about. I'm sure he'll be equally wel-coome wi' both. Now, Uncle Job, sup up, yo' mun be half-starvt."

A wintry smile lighted his face. "You're the spit of your mother, Sarah," he said. "Just the same costard face and little turn-up nose! She was a good one to the poor. And you've my brother Jem's mouth and forehead."

THE RETURN OF UNCLE JOB

Hannah and Louisa forthwith began to question him concerning the sheep-farm; but their inquiries depressed the old man, and he displayed an odd reticence. At last, after Hannah's hint that maybe he thought of buying land in the Peak country, he disclosed the fact that he had returned with little more than he had taken away.

"I never was as well off as folks said," he explained; "and the last few years has well-nigh ruined me. In course, there's enough to keep me plainly for the rest o' my days; but as for buyin' land—well, I've a mind to let that be."

As he spoke, the conveyance that was to convey the widows to their homes, drew up at the gate, and without a word they went upstairs to don their mantles and bonnets. When they returned, their chins were in the air and their eyes steely.

"I've been thinkin' as, after all, the wind would be too strong for yo' up at my place," said Louisa, "an' 'tis likely enew as my gran'-childer'd worry yo'."

"An' I've rec'lected as my spare-room's as damp as dew," added Hannah. "Good-night, Sarah, loove, good-night, Uncle."

The old man blinked foolishly as they departed; but Sarah sat beside him, and stroked his hand.

"I'm glad yo're none rich, Uncle," she said softly; "yo'll bide wi' me—I've a chamber at

THE RETURN OF UNCLE JOB

the top o' the stairs as yo' can hev', an' we'll be as merry as crickets."

"They're right in doin' it," he muttered; "for they're their father's daughters . . . but you're poor brother Jem's."

MALL'S WARM FRIEND

A GAUNT elderly woman, gowned in the coarse black serge that Milton Church doles annually to well-reputed widows who are, despite their poverty, not in receipt of parish pay, made her way up the field path that leads from the village to the moor. It was many years since she had occasion to climb the hill, and half-unconsciously she chose the rough walk favoured by young lovers in preference to the less laborious road. Her errand was urgent enough; but, now and then, when she paused for breath (being asthmatically disposed), she moaned querulously because of the associations aroused by this unwonted journey.

At the hollow where the track crosses a peaty stream that runs down to Milton Brook, she slipped from a loose stepping-stone and stumbled into a bed of mud. Her boots were made of cloth that saturated instantly, and her white stockings were sodden and discoloured midway up the calf. For the remainder of her walk she held her skirt and petticoats higher than was seemly. As she reached the gate of the Nook—old Daniel

MALL'S WARM FRIEND

Pursglove's great farmstead—she saw the man for whom she had come driving the kine into a squat thatched shippon.

He passed with a curt nod; she could not speak because of a lump that rose and fell suffocatingly in her windpipe. She followed timorously to the building, and stood with bony hands clinging to the hatch.

The man's back was turned; he was whistling softly to the drowsy accompaniment of spirting milk. The tune was "She Wore a Wreath of Roses," and somehow he contrived to throw into it a deep, heartbreaking pathos that no singer could have peered. The woman's head jerked, in rhythm with the movements of his arms. In that dumb watching she found herself admiring the square shoulders and the round head with its thick and crisp chestnut hair. He was so intent on his work that he did not notice her until, after milking the tenth cow, he rose finally from the three-legged stool and approached the doorway, carrying two huge pails, so full that the foam hung over the brims. When he saw her waiting there, he started slightly, and lowered the pails to the floor.

"Is't me yo're after, Mrs Grëaves?" he said. "I dunna see whatten you want wi' me."

She sighed very heavily, then her voice came in a feeble whimper :

"Mall's coome back," she said.

MALL'S WARM FRIEND

He raised the wooden latch and took up his pails again.

"Ay, so I've heerd," he remarked gruffly. "Would yo' mind lettin' me pass?"

When she had moved aside, he strode away without another word, and passing through the farmyard, entered the ivy-covered dairy. A stout servant-wench, new to the place, chuckled as she saw, through the open window, Mrs Greaves tip-toeing after him, still holding her garments knee-high.

"Yo've gotten a pratty sweetyeart!" she said, laughingly. "Lord ha' mercy, hoo'll nab yo', sure enew!"

The man's face did not relax; she shrugged her shoulders and began to pour the milk through sieves into great stoneware punch-eons. Her fellow-servant went towards the inner door that opened to the house-passage; Mrs Greaves thrust her head anxiously through the grated window, heedless that her rusty bonnet was pushed to the back of her neck.

"Yeb, lad," she cried, "yo' might coome out an' spëak wi' me?"

The dairymaid giggled; the man turned on his heel, primed with a fierce reply. His face was flushed and sullen; a deep wrinkle cleft his forehead, rising between the eyebrows and disappearing in the tumbled curls. He was handsome after a fashion, deeply sun-burned, with fine white teeth and big gloomy eyes. Something in the wizened old face,

MALL'S WARM FRIEND

however, kept back the imprecation he had prepared.

"Go to the barn-close, then," he muttered, "onless yo' want everybody to hear yo'. I'll coome when I'm rëady."

Mrs Greaves's fingers were clasped foolishly together.

"Dunna be long, lad," she said. "I've gotten to get whöame afoore dark. Emma Baggalley's tuk my plaace for an hour, but I dunna feel easy."

Then she dragged herself through the yard and over the stile to a long field that was bounded at the further end by the highway. He left the dairy, unheeding the jerk which the playful young woman gave with her elbow. Outside, after he had carefully lighted his pipe, he swaggered slowly after the dame. He found her leaning against the gate, mumbling her lips. After due consideration, he sat at some distance, on the end of a sandstone drinking trough, that had split from end to end in last year's frost.

"I'm rëady, missus," he said. "Get it ower as soon's yo' can. I dunna want all th' fowk on the farm to mak' a song about yo' bein' here."

"Yeb," she said, "yo' shouldna talk so, for I be full of trouble. But for Mall's cryin' e'er sin daybrëak, I'd ne'er ha' coome. I know as yo've been wronged, Yeb, an' I'm shamed o' beggin' owt fro' yo'. But whatten mun I do—whatten mun I do?"

MALL'S WARM FRIEND

"Oh, domn it!" exclaimed Yeb. "'Tis laate i' the day to coome wi' such a tale. Tell Mall I've nowt to say to her, an' I want to hear nowt about her. Hoo used me treacherous, an' none till the end o' my days will I forgie her."

Mrs Greaves moved suddenly forward and caught his sleeve.

"Dunna say them words," she wailed. "My dowter's coome whöame—coome whöame to dee!"

Yeb quailed, then burst into a forced laugh.

"Oo, ay!" he cried, "coome whöame to dee!"

She staggered back to the gate.

"Yeb, 'tis God's truth—the doctor tow'd me to-day as there's no hope i' the world. Hoo's to go—none all as man can do 'll save her. Yeb, listen to me, Yeb, hoo's been beaten—hoo's been starvt! An' hoo does nowt but ding: 'I want Yeb—my Yeb mun coome—Mooother, go yo' an' fetch my lad Yeb!'"

The man opened the gate, and she passed through to the road. Without another word he followed and walked by her side. After the first glance, which showed her the muscles of his face contracted and the eyelashes wet with tears, Mrs Greaves's nerve returned, and she began to speak in a high, shrill voice.

"Her husband's a rank villain; when hoo took to her bed he offs wi' anoother ooman.

MALL'S WARM FRIEND

Bit by bit hoo sold her furniture—theere weerena much i' the house—till t' oother day, when hoo crawled to th' 'Yellow Lion,' an' Cowper browt her fro' the town in his 'bus. I didna know, Yeb, or I'd ha' gone to her. Hoo's none written for months; I knew nowt till hoo tum'led in at the door, straight into my arms. As light as a feather—her as used for to be so plump!"

Yeb nodded; his teeth were clenched firmly to keep his chin from trembling.

"It weerena my wish for her to wed him," she went on. "Yo' blamed me; but pride kep' me fro' setting mysen right wi' yo'. Hoo's my only bairn—I canna bear to say owt again the lass. I know 'tweere cruel hard on yo', when yo'd saved up yor wages an' took th' house—but hoo's paid for 't, Yeb—hoo's paid for all hoo did—paid to the last farthin'."

She did not lower her voice as they passed through Milton village. The women who chatted to each other in the open doorways, knitting socks, or binding children's patent-leather slippers for the small shoe factories, shook their heads sympathetically as she went by, and displayed no mirth because of the grotesqueness of her gait. Near the lower end of the Lydgate—a steep lane where, in past centuries, the householders in turn kept watch by night—she began to run, and only paused in front of a roughcast cottage.

"Look thro' the window, Yeb," she said,

MALL'S WARM FRIEND

almost jubilantly. "Theere hoo sits i' the big chair by the fire. Parson's wife, hoo's browt her soome churchy books, but hoo wunna read. Hoo does nowt but stare atween the bars." Each pane of the window held a greenish bubble, and the sill was covered with hydrangeas in brightly-raddled pots. Some time passed before Yeb could distinguish the figure in the arm-chair. And then he saw nought clearly, for the watery mist thickened before his eyes. He turned aside; Mrs Greaves took his hand and drew him into the house-place, and a ghostly little laugh rang in his ears.

At the last, when Mall came back to rest briefly in the house where she was born, she displayed an unwonted look of refinement. The buxom beauty Yeb had loved was gone for ever, leaving in its place a wan emaciation painful to behold. But the bony face with its prominent chin told of infinite suffering—told of a patience taught by oppression. She had persuaded the woman who had sat with her during her mother's absence to curl her bright yellow hair; even yet the air smelt of ruin wrought by over-heated tongs. Her hands were lying in her lap, clasping something beneath the apron.

"Well," she said, "yo've coome, Yeb, an' for all the world yo' put me i' mind o' when the schoolmissus used for to lug yo' into the room, out o' the playground! Set yo' down by me,

MALL'S WARM FRIEND

Yeb ; I havena much to say, but I'd liefer yo' weere nigh to me."

He carried a low rush-bottomed chair to her side, and sat looking into her face. She drew one of her hands from its hiding-place, and laid it on his crown. He flinched slightly: the little palm was hot as fire.

"I'm none a-goin' to excuse mysen, Yeb," she said merrily. "I know whatten I've been—a bad sweetyeart an' a bad dowter—an' I'm fixed on askin' yo' summat now as is o' a piece wi' my character. I weere fause as wayter—took wi' a devil's fine clöathes an' rings an' chains. An' cause I weere a domned fool, I ran away wi' him, without searchin' for his horns, or pullin' of his shoon to see if his feet weere cloven."

She had ever been a whimsical talker ; Yeb found nought strange in her words.

"A moonth afore the day we'd fixed for our weddin'! Let that be, Yeb, I'll say no moore."

Her hand had grown as cold as ice now; she drew it away and put it with its fellow.

"I've paid the price," she said. "I've paid wi' my life ; I've paid wi' all I had i' the world—all save one thing. Dost remember the bit o' househowd stuff I kept—th' prize yo' won i' the Christmas raffle?"

She tugged her apron aside; in the hollow of her lap lay a tall pot-bellied metal teapot, with a faint steam issuing from its ill-fitting lid.

MALL'S WARM FRIEND

"I couldna part wi't, lad, tho' I weere starvin'," she murmured. "I couldna an' I wouldna! When I'd no fire i' the house wheere he kept me, I used for to beg the neeighbours to fill it wi' boilin' wayter, an' I nursed it, as I'm nursin' it now—just th' same as if 'tweere a babby. Yo' see, Yeb, it kept the cowl fro' me."

She laughed very softly, till a spasm of pain checked the sound.

"Yeb, I looved yo' more nor I thowt, an' I ne'er looved him. 'Tweere but a lass's fancy, Yeb—quickly made an' quickly repented. I looved yo', Yeb, an' I'd gotten nowt but a teapot. But 't has been a good warm friend. . . . Oh, dall it, lad, stop thy belderin'! I've only a short time left me. . . . I want yo' to play at loovin' me whilst I bide."

"It'll be no play, Mally," said the man. "'Tis God's truth as I loove yo'."

THE WISE BUSYBODY

SARAH LITTON sat near the geraniums in her house-place window, feverishly stitching the front of a white linen shirt for Squire Furness. Although she was only thirty, she had worked as a seamstress for the last fourteen years, so that she might be able to keep at home her only brother, who was much younger than herself, and so weak with St Vitus's Dance that since his early boyhood he had been incapable of doing ought for himself. The lad had died on Christmas Eve, and the strain of the last few weeks of his illness had completely broken her down, so that for fully four months she had been scarce able to wield her needle. Being of a high spirit, she had refused monetary assistance from anyone; and now every farthing of her money was gone, before she felt anywise equal to the struggle for existence.

It was not, however, the question of ways and means that was troubling her just now, but the fact that a man of settled position, but altogether disagreeable repute, had seen fit to make her an offer of marriage. Her

THE WISE BUSYBODY

high, narrow forehead was puckered almost angrily; now and then she shrugged her shoulders in distaste. She had been something of a coquette in youth, and in a fit of anger had sent away the only lad who had ever appealed to her heart. At the time she justified herself with the belief that duty forbade her to marry, and burden another's life with the care of poor Jack, who, in spite of all her tender service, had possessed a very querulous temper—though, to do him justice, he had softened strangely before the end.

She was filled with bitterness now because of the emptiness of her future. The widower who offered himself now was in possession of an income of a pound a week—beyond what he earned as butter-huckster for the whole of Milton Dale. Her thriftiness had fascinated him even more than the knowledge that the thatched cottage, with its comfortable, old-fashioned furniture, was her own property. His own house was large and bare—her chairs and tables would make it homely;—moreover, when her health was restored she could earn sufficient to keep herself, and he need only provide enough for his own expenses. Sarah understood the fellow fairly well; but she was so weary that she felt incapable of summoning up strength to say that she could never, never become his wife.

As she sewed she heard the garden-gate

THE WISE BUSYBODY

click, and, peeping through the lattice, she saw the huckster, flushed with beer, coming up the narrow path. His face was distorted with a fatuous grin, and his lips were trickling. He had never visited her in this condition before, and her temper rose, and she moved to the door and turned the key before his hand pressed heavily on the latch. Believing that she was not at home, he soon came to the window, and, as she had withdrawn from sight, feasted his eyes on the glossy black furniture of the house-place. After a few minutes he grunted complacently, and returned to the porch, where he left on the stone bench three duck's eggs of doubtful freshness. He retired reluctantly, as if disappointed because he might not gratify himself with her thanks for such unwonted bounty.

No sooner had he passed beyond a curve of the lane, when a tall and thin old woman made her way through a narrow stile, and came towards the cottage. Sarah recognised her as a kinswoman, who kept house for her brother up Grassbrook way. So many years had passed since she had undertaken such a long journey, that the seamstress knew that her errand must be of vital import. She unlocked the door hastily, and Aunt Martha, casting a furtive glance in the huckster's direction, entered and sat rigidly on the settle, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. She had

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an impediment in her speech, and as she untied the strings of her scuttle bonnet, and loosened her grey-and-black plaid shawl, strange incoherent sounds came slowly from her throat.

The kettle was on the hob; Sarah brewed a pot of tea, and after the first cup, hurriedly gulped, the old woman's talk became intelligible.

"Drat yo' for a fool, Sarah Litton!" she said bitterly—"as big a fool as God e'er made! I'd been i' the way o' respectin' yo' till I heerd o't; but now I know as yo've gotten no more sense nor my broother James's crib-eatin' filly!"

Sarah was too startled to resent her plain speaking; instead she began to weep. "Whatten ha' I doone amiss?" she whimpered.

"Whatten ha' yo' doone amiss?" repeated the dame. "Yo' to ask that, when yo've settled to marry the butter-huckster—to take that greedy dottle, when yo'd once the chance o' ha'in' one o' the best chaps i' the Dale!—a chap as (tho' he's ne'er coome near yo' since yo' flouted him) has kep' single 'cause he could find no oother wench to his likin'."

The younger woman's cheeks had grown rosy-red, and her chin was trembling oddly.

"If yo' mean William Aatram," she said, in a low voice, "he's forgot me long since. I couldna burden him wi' my poor Jack."

"Ay, 'twas that, o' coorse!" said Aunt

THE WISE BUSYBODY

Martha, "'twas that, natyryally! None yor sharp temper, oh dear no. Yo' made a mistake—the Aatrams is set fowk—if yo' thowt he'd ask yo' again—an', dall it! yo've gotten properly punished."

Sarah's temper was rising now; her colour had died, and she was paler than ever.

"'Tis a vast pity," she said, "as yo' an' me, who coome together but seldom, mun needs quarrel! If yo've owt to say again the butter-huckster, prythee say it an' ha' doone."

Aunt Martha's acid facetiousness disappeared. She was naturally of a kindly disposition (though her stumbling tongue could bite like a file), and she felt genuinely sorry for the young woman.

"Well," she began, "I'll as well get it out, an' yo' mun see the man same as I've seen him. If yo'll rec'lect, 'tis but two year since his second wife deed, an' yo' may ha' heerd as her an' me weere companions when we weere wenches? An' when hoo weere took bad wi' the bronkittus (an' a carrybangle on her arm, too), I used for to go an' see her now an' then, an' as his land lays again' ours 'tweere eäsy enew for me."

She drew out a red pocket handkerchief and wiped her eyes. "Poor thing, but hoo did suffer!—'tweere a penance to see her! Hoo deed o' fair neglect, hoo did! The brute had always kep' her skimpy wi' food, tho' he'd

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bezzle hissen well-nigh to dëath. Why, yo' can see that writ on his face! An' when I went, tweere ne'er empty-handed, for I made jillies an' custards an' owt as I thowt hoo'd fancy. But I could ne'er see her alone an' feed her, for he weere always i' the chamber, an' he'd say: 'Hoo's just had a bit o' summat; yo' leave whatten yo've browt, an' I'll see 'tis all right.' So, like a ninny, I did as he bade, tho' theere weere that i' her eyen as might ha' tow'd me."

She rose abruptly and went to the open door, shading her forehead to look over the fields, as if she expected to see someone approach. After a while she nodded sharply and turned again to the house-place, and her skirt twitched one of the duck's eggs, so that it fell to the flag and splashed its unsavoury contents over her shoes.

"Lord save us!" she cried vexedly. "The fellow's left a fine loove-gift! Coomin' a-coortin' yo' wi' rotten eggs! Last year's pickled—an' pickled badly! Get us thy floor-clout, wench—one as can be brenned."

Sarah came towards her with a rueful countenance, and wiped her shoes and cleaned the stone; then, fearful lest another mishap should occur, threw the remaining eggs into a bed of nettles in the lane.

"Well, I mun on wi' my tale," continued Aunt Martha. "It so happed as I knew nowt o' the matter till the night hoo passed

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away, when I sat up wi' her. Hoo'd been onconscious e'er since morn, but just afoore midnight—when her husband weere liggin' down for a bit on the settle downstairs—hoo came to an' spoke. 'Thank yo' kindly, Martha Leech,' said hoo, 'thank yo' kindly for whatten yo've doone i' the cookin' line. But 'tweere no good, for Jabez he had 'em all hissen, an' I've fed on nowt since I weere bedfast but whöatmeal gruel!' Them weere her woords, an' 'tis the first time I've spoken o' 'em to ony livin' body."

Sarah's face had flushed again—this time with righteous indignation. "The dirty wratch!" she exclaimed.

"Ay, he is so," said Aunt Martha; "but that's none all. Would yo' b'lieve as he came a-coortin' me within two months after hoo weere laid i' the graveyard! Hee-hee! I weere sittin' by the fire, heelin' a stockin' o' James's, when in he came an' put it to me straight. Says he, 'Yo're a moneyed ooman, and I'm a moneyed man, an, if yo'll gie me control o' whatten yo've put by, yo'll be missus by rights o' a better whöame nor thissen.' An' then I just looks at him an' says: 'Missus o' a three-footed porridge-pot!' Belike he saw my meanin', for he catched up his hat an' flew. Since then he's run after five oother oomen—both maids an' widows—but none'll look on the same side o' the röad. Fowk is talkin' about yo'!"

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But Sarah, scarce heeding her, sat huddled together, with her face hidden behind her long, thin hands. After a long silence, Aunt Martha rose and went again to the door—this time beckoning to someone who stood behind the full-flowered elder-tree that grew near the garden gate. A tall, loosely-built young fellow, with a brown, eager face, came timidly up the path; but, checked by her gesture, withdrew behind the trellis-work of the porch. The old woman returned and touched Sarah on the shoulder.

“Will Aatram knows as the brute’s a-coortin’ yo’,” she said, in a gentler voice. “He tow’d me how sorry he weere to find yo’ pickin’ up wi’ such rubbish. I gied him a bit o’ advice to coome and spëak plain an’ frank, but he says nay, for yo’ weere a wench as ’ld stick to her woord till her deein’ day. ‘A man mun be ayther a man or a mouse, Will,’ says I, ‘an’ if yo’ will be a mouse, why, then, yo’ will, for nowt as I can do’ll hinder yo’.’ I tell yo’ he weere wrung thro’ an’ thro’ wi’ th’ thowt! Oh, yo’ hard-yearted hussy, a-spoilin’ wi’ yor whimsies a good lad’s life!”

Sarah had flung her white apron over her head, and was now rocking her chair so wildly, that every moment it seemed as if she would be flung out to the stone floor.

“He couldna ha’ looved me,” she wailed, “or he’ld ne’er ha’ stopped away all these years! I didna know my own mind when I

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sent him away. Men i' loove ne'er take a maid's nay as mēanin' owt!"

There was a rustle in the porch; but the old woman turned such an angry face that it subsided instantly.

"Thou innocent babby!" she cried mockingly, "how long may it be since thou weert shortened? Dear, dear, to think as Will weere picked off the same heap as oother men! Why, I tell yo' as his fowk weere e'er noted for tender feelin's an' for belief i' ooman's honesty. Yo' gied him a downright blow, yo' did; yo' killed his nerves out an' out! Ask yo' again? none he!"

At that moment she heard a husky voice in the porch, whisper: "Ay, but I will!" She moved threateningly to the door; the man standing there quailed before her infuriated aspect. Sarah had been too much engrossed in her own trouble to hear.

"'Tis all very fine," growled the old woman. "Owd broth's sooner hotted nor new broth's made, as my mother used for to say. Ne'ertheless, yo're none so low-minded as to try to make him ask yo' again now yo're as poor as Job's louse!"

Sarah tore down her apron and waved her arms frantically. "I'm none so poor as I need stand this soort o' talk!" she cried. "Bear i' mind as I took nowt fro' yo', an' as I want nowt."

Aunt Martha appeared nowise intimidated.

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"If yo' didna'," she said gravely, "'tweere na 'cause yo' weere na asked or weere na welcoome. 'Tweere all yor silly pride! An' now yo're well-nigh starvin'. Dunna yo' forget, moreover, as I'm owd enew to be yor moother, an' as I wunna stand such talk! A sharp tongue I may ha'; but I've nowt but goodwill for yo'."

The young woman's anger faded again. "I mēan no harm," she gasped; "but things is harder nor I can bear. . . . I'm broke down—I wish to God as I weere liggin' aside o' poor Jack!"

Aunt Martha drew a chair near, and sat with one arm around Sarah's waist, with the other drawing the thin peaked face until it rested against her tight-clad bosom.

"I doubt I've been hard on yo', loove," she said; "but mind yo' 'tweere for yor own good. I couldna stand the butter-huckster coomin', an' yo' settlin' down to the thowt o' weddin' him, when he's such a twöad! Besides, fowk is talkin'. Ruth Froggat, hoo had the face to ask me—i' the churchyard, o' all places—if the banns had been put up, her bein' dēaf, an' none catchin' woords aright! So I've coome to say as 'tis brother James's wish, an' mine, too, as yo' lock up yor cottage, an' stay wi' us till yo' be strong an' fit to tak' yor own work again."

Had Sarah not been reduced to a condition of great physical weakness, it is doubtful

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whether she would have accepted her kinsfolk's hospitality; for one of her proudest thoughts was that she had never been beholden to anyone since the day when she began to earn her own living. But now the prospect of rest and freedom from care, and a sufficiency of good food was so comforting that she could only sigh out her thanks.

"Theere's one thing as yo' mun reckon for, tho'," said Aunt Martha, "an' that is, as like as none, yo'll see Will Aatram every night; for he's been like a son to James an' me, a-sittin' wi' us after milkin', an' readin' the paper wi' all the news. Bless me, wench, cēase nippin' o' my arm—I'm none a young man! Now, say yo' winna mind bein' plēasant wi' poor Will?"

"I canna say owt," Sarah murmured; "'twill all hang on how he uses me."

"If that's all, I needna worry," said Aunt Martha; "for he thinks a vast lot o' yo'; he tow'd me so, this very afternoon. I' fact—i' fact, he came along wi' me part o' the way, Sarah—an' I'd much ado to keep him fro' runnin' after the butter-huckster. Now, dunna take on, wench."

Sarah's hands were pressed to her heart; the seams of her threadbare bodice cracked.

"Oh, aunt, whatten mun I do, whatten mun I do? Theere'll be war atwixt 'em, an' the huckster'll fell Will wi' his grēat fists!"

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"I doubt that," said Aunt Martha, laughing outright. "Gi'e me a young cockerel for pluck! the lad's limber as an effet! Still, 'tis yor duty to save further scandal, an' if I weere yo' I'd just say to Will as yo' begged him to forget how yo've used him. I'm afeard, if yo' dunna, as they'll fight it out this very night. Be sure Will'll take what yo' say very kindly."

A curious change had come over Sarah's face; her eyes were shining brightly, despite the late tears, and all the lines of trouble had disappeared from her forehead.

"Just yo' let me know wheere he is now," she said hurriedly, "an' I'll go to him an tell him whatten's truth—as ne'er a day's passed wi'out me longin' for him!"

Before Aunt Martha could reply, the man had left the porch and come with two great strides into the house-place. Sarah's sharp cry of astonishment died away in a soft murmur as he caught her in his arms so impetuously that both swayed against Aunt Martha's chair.

"Drat yo'!" said the dame, half-crossly. "Yo' should ha' waited an' let her tell yo'. 'Tis wise to humble a ooman's spirit."

But neither Sarah nor William paid any attention. An hour later all three were walking across the fields, and Aunt Martha, who loitered in the rear, ostentatiously swinging the door-key, chuckled merrily

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as scraps of their talk reached her cunning old ears.

“Lord! but th’ lad’s growed mesterful!” she said. “Three week to-day it mun be, an’ nowt i’ the world’ll put it off!”

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UPSTAIRS in the "Bold Cloudesley" club-room, the dancing class was holding its last meeting, and the lads and lasses of Milton, stimulated with the thought of coming festivities, were more frolicsome than their wont. The crowd of men in the bar-parlour looked nervously at the worm-eaten beams overhead, whenever some spirited couple, dizzied by the fiddler's new waltz, fell with a heavy thud, amidst the piercing acclamations of the surer-footed.

Most of the smokers had ascended the staircase and looked for a while through the open doorway: then, shrugging their shoulders, had returned to the place of fellow-toss-pots. Milton men renounce the pleasures of the dance in their thirtieth year, and look upon their juniors' enjoyment with something akin to contempt.

The eldest grandson of Mrs Fearneshough, a bright and comely lad of eight years, sat beside a round table, writing figures on green pasteboard gun-wads: leaning over him, with both hands on the back of the antiquated chair, was Matthew Robson, a

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farmer from Cockey Hamlet, at the end of Milton Edge. The man was simple and lackadaisical, yet strikingly picturesque of aspect. He was tall and well made; his face was mild and pale, with great blue eyes, and hair and beard of gleaming gold; his plump, softly curving lips were too short to meet. At present his mouth was wide open, and his tongue playing catch-me-who-can with pure white teeth. His nose and brow and chin were exquisitely shapen . . . but for the inefficient lips the man's head was worthy of being copied for a saint's picture. A faded coat of blue velveteen covered his slender figure; the unbuttoned front revealed a mole-skin waistcoat, worn in places to glossy bareness, and embellished with a lustreless mosaic chain.

"Dear, dear!" he said, "yo' be a fine scholar, Jem—yo' can make numbers as good as ony parson! An' count, too; why, 'tis a job wi' me whene'er I get beyond twenty."

"Grandmother says that folk weren't schooled before Mr Nichols came," said the lad kindly. "Grandmother herself can't tell a B from a bull's foot."

Mrs Fearnough, who had come in with a heavily-laden tray, covered with a white cloth, overheard and quailed before the frankness of her descendant. "Gran'moother can tell whatten a birch-rod's for!" she snapped.

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"Owd fowk do know summat. An' if yo've doone scrabblin' the raffle tickets—off yo' go to bed."

An old gaffer interposed; for the child, innocent of wrong-doing, was beginning to blubber loudly. "Let him be, missus," he said. "He's gotten to howd the bag whilst we're drawin'. I always howd as childer should be taught early the ways o' the woorld. Book larnin's nowt—'tis oother things as matter!"

Mrs Fearnough set her tray on a dresser and moved aside the cloth, displaying to all a great turkey, plucked and trussed, with a spray of holly skewered neatly to its breast; a couple of plump ducks, a brightly-glazed pork-pie, and a nickel-plated alarum clock. The men clustered around, and fingered the prizes with outspoken satisfaction. Mrs Fearnough, after acknowledging their praise as modestly as if in very truth she were giving these good things merely out of kindness of heart, went to the hearth, where Matthew Robson stood airing his back before the fire.

"How's poor M'ria?" she said. "I've been thinkin' about her all the day."

"Hoo's the same as e'er," he replied. "Patient as Job, wi' ne'er a murmur. I havena seen her since noontide—they would ha' me at Foolow to practise carols. 'Twill be a bit o' money, onyhow, for Kirsmas. . . .

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I mean to get her a bottle o' sherry-wine, an' a couple o' pigeons. . . ."

"Then yo' arena goin' to try yor luck at the raffle?" she said. "I'm sorry for that——"

"Yo've no call for to be, missus. M'ria gave me a shillin' as hoo'd saved for weeks. But I might as well chuck it on the fire—I've ne'er won owt i' my life, an' I ne'er shall."

Mrs Fearnough shook her head. "It seems to me," she said, "as when a man doesna care or he wins or loses, the luck goes to him. Yo' used for to be sure o' winnin'—an' yo' ne'er did—now, when yo' care nowt, yo're very like to get first o' all."

Then she fetched a pillow-slip from her bed, and after carefully examining the numbered gun-wads, she put them inside, and shook the bag vigorously, and passed it to each speculator, who conscientiously strove to mix the contents well. When this was done, the men ranged themselves by the wall, and after paying their shillings to the careful hostess (who protested once or twice when she found the coin overmuch worn), they thrust their hands into the bag, and each withdrew a wad, which a tacit code of honour prevented him examining until all had followed suit.

Matthew Robson gave a loud chuckle of

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delight; for once in his life he had been luckier than his fellows; the wad that lay in his palm was sprawled over with the words *First Prize, Turk*. His excitement was so great that he could not wait to spend anything "for the good of the house," and after a few whispered words with Mrs Fearnough, who wrapped the bird in a clean cotton towel, he stole from the inn, and turned up the wide road towards the churchyard, whence a field-path led to his little farmstead on the moor-edge.

As he passed the "Red Lion," however, an inn ill-reputed in Milton since the death of the host's wife, an ancient piano began to jingle, and he stopped short to listen to a powerful female voice that sang with considerable unction a song called "The Captive Greek Maid." He stole nearer the window, and peeped through a corner where the blind was torn. The songstress, who played her own accompaniment, was splendidly attired; in canary-coloured satin; a large expanse of bust was adorned with a necklace and pendants of pearl glass beads. He recognised her as a lady who went round at Wakes and other holiday times to attract unwise men to inns which the more respectable did not frequent. In the dim light that came from the smoky lamps, her charms acquired a voluptuous aspect unknown at other times; to the

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weak - minded fellow outside she seemed beautiful as an angel.

As he leaned forward, resting the prize on the sill, the door opened, and a boon-companion, who had seen his glowing face against the pane, crept up on tiptoe and struck him heavily between the shoulders.

"Hoo's i' her best form to-night," he stuttered. "Hoo's a-singing like a larrock! Lord save us!—jewelled as if hoo weere the richest lady i' the coountry! Coome in, Matthey—coome an ha' a glass for the season o' the year?"

Robson hesitated, thinking of his ailing wife sitting alone beside a turf fire, waiting for his return, and of the pleasure the magnificent turkey would give her. The songstress's voice rose and fell in a piercing cadence; his demur died still-born, and he shambled into the inn.

She was not a bad woman: in better days she had been over-generous, and people had preyed upon her. Now, in her widowhood, with five young children to support, she was compelled to stoop to unworthy means to find bread for their callow mouths. Her voice, had it been trained properly in youth, would have been world-famed for strength, compass and sweetness; even to-day she struck wonderful notes. She was handsome still, in an opulent fashion, with a richly-coloured skin and dull black hair.

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Matthew entered and sat beside the piano. The woman knew him well as a ready giver of drinks, and she smiled seductively when the song was finished. He beckoned to the landlord, paid his last sixpence for two tumblers of gin and hot water. She nodded gratefully; they clinked glasses and drank to each other's health, then she turned again to the piano and sung a stupid and vulgar music-hall song that appealed keenly to the popular taste. Matthew, however, who had little liking for coarse innuendo, presented so blank a countenance that she flushed with an odd mortification.

"That's not your kind, Mr Robson," she remarked, "it's easy to see that you don't approve. Now just name something you'd like, and I'll try to oblige."

The man scratched his head very deliberately. "Last Wakes," he said, after a long silence, "yo' sang 'The Last Rose o' Summer,' an' I thowt I'd ne'er heerd owt so grand i' my life. . . ."

"I once sang that before three thousand people," she said with a sigh. "Oh yes, if you want it, I'm willing."

She played a florid prelude, then began to sing. Her voice was softer now, more husky, more emotional; most of the listeners experienced mental disquietude. When she was silent, she gulped down the remainder of the gin and water, and taking a lacquered tray

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from the top of the piano, she went round the room to collect gratuities, and received a scanty guerdon of pence. When she came to Matthew, she paused whilst he pretended to search his pockets.

"Give me something worth having," she whispered. "I've done very badly — it's God's truth I don't know where to-morrow's food's coming from. There's the lodgings to pay, or we're to be turned out, and my youngest girl is ill abed."

The fool did not deliberate; the earnestness of the woman's appeal drove away the last shred of his common-sense. He unwrapped the turkey hastily, dumped it down on the waiter, and then, half-cowed, went from the place, banging the door in protest.

He walked home very slowly, and stood for a long time in the farm-yard before he could summon courage to enter. His wife rose as he lifted the latch; she stumbled over the sanded floor to meet him.

"I weere gettin' uneasy," she said, watching him smilingly; "for Bill Taanend called an hour ago, an' tow'd me as yo'd left th' 'Bowd Claadesley' wi' the prize."

He put his arm around her waist and drew her to the hearth. On the hob a little saucepan, full of beer and spices, simmered.

"I called in at the 'Red Lion,'" he began.

"Ay, lad," said Maria, "'tis Kirsmas time, an' very dull for yo' up here, wi' me coughin'

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till yo' be deaf. I've nowt again yo' enjoyin' yorsen, Matthey. . . . Wheere hast hidden the turkey?"

He stooped and hid his face on her shoulder. "M'ria," he said, passionately, "I dunna know how or why I did it, bu' I gave the bird away to a singin' ooman. Hoo weere i' woorse case nor oursens. . . . I've gotten no excuse, wench, I've gotten nowt to say. . . . I'd no right to part wi't. . . . M'ria, speak to me, tell me as yo' dunna bear malice."

She sat down on the settle, and drew his right hand to her shrunken bosom.

"Matthey," she said, "how can yo' talk so? I ne'er bore malice for owt my lad did. 'Tis only for yo' as I'm a bit hurt. . . . Yo' see, Matthey, I weere feelin' glad as yo'd ha' summat good to eat on the last Kirsmas Day as I shall be wi' yo'."

Her eyes called his face close to her own; she kissed him tenderly on the cheek. "Eh, my poor lad!" she murmured.

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THE Wakes were livelier than usual, and since summer had dallied until the end of September, the little forecourts of the cottages glowed brightly with stock-gilliflowers and asters and dahlias. The garden of the "Bold Cloudesley" was infinitely gayer than the rest; for Mrs Fearnough, the hostess, had grown nought save scarlet poppies, *immortelles*—pink, golden, and snow-white, and African marigolds, richly coloured, but bitter of scent. This garden overlooked the green where the show-booths and canvas-shaded bazaars stood; in a sheltered arbour of trellis-work interlaced with honeysuckle that was blooming for the second time, a few farmers sat drinking, and chatting without removing from their lips the green glazed mouthpieces of their churchwardens. They had spent the morning in saloon-shooting, and in playing the game of "Aunt Sally," with cocoa-nuts for prizes.

But Chapman of Milton Hollow (the farm that runs alongside the brook), who was usually the merriest in any party, was more

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laconic than anyone had ever known him, and after a while one of his neighbours twitted him about his silence.

"Be yo' badly, Ike?" he said, "or ha' yo' gotten summat on yor mind? Lawfu' case! yo' mun ha' lost money wi' that face! Weere it pocket-pickin', or whatten?"

The old man shook a closely-cropped grey head. "'Tweere nayther," he replied. "I'm but worryin' about Alice Pirritty. I've heerd summat very sad this morn."

"Aunt Alice?" cried the other. "Why, is owt wrong wi' the poor soul?"

"Well, 'tweere Missus Drabble as towed me: owd Aunt Alice has coome to her last penny-piece, an' to-day hoo's a-starting for the Bastille!"

"Then 'tis a domned shame!" exclaimed another. "Eighty year owd or moore, an' no better-respected ooman on the coountry side. I'm for gi'in' her summat—tisna fair as one who's doone so much for her fellows shouldna dee under a private roof-tree!"

He rose to quit the arbour; Chapman caught his sleeve as he passed.

"Yo're startin' on a useless task," he said. "The poor owd lass has gotten all the Pirritty pride, an' hoo'll tak' fro nobody. I a'most went down on my knees to her; but hoo just smiled quietly, an' said hoo couldna be behowden to ony. Hoo's paid rates for nigh on sixty year, hoo says, an'

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'tis time as hoo got summat i' return. An' when I came away, hoo'd called in her neebours, for to gi'e 'em such odds an' ends as hoo'd gotten, so as they might remember her."

"I'd no notion as hoo weere so badly off," said George Fox, of Silence Farm at Chelmorton, twelve miles away, who had come over for the Wakes. "Hoo used for to be quite coomfortable when I weere a young chap. Sixteen acres o' good wheatland, down at the bottom end o' the Dale weere her own prop'ty, beside the little farmstead where hoo weere born. In coorse I heerd o' her raisin' money on that to set James Badger, her stepmother's son, born i' her first marriage, i' business; but I ne'er thowt as hoo weere crippled at all. Why, James he made a fine thing out o' cattle-brokin'; for I seed him, none a year ago at Buxton. Frail and worn he looked, tho' scarce ower sixty-five. He weere stayin' at a grëat boardin'-house on th' Macclesfield road."

Chapman pursed his lips contemptuously. "He took the money off her," he said; "but to my certain b'lief he ne'er gave a ha'penny back. Ootherwise the fowk as held the mortgage wouldna ha' sold the spot 'cause hoo couldna pay the interest. 'Tis ten year ago since that happed, an' owd Alice has been livin' on her furniture. Soome grand oak hoo'd gotten, an' the quality used for

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to buy it at th' price hoo fixed, which weere ne'er onreasonable."

"Hoo weere as brave as they make 'em," said Daniel Twigg, a meek gaffer, for an hour or two freed from the control of a careful wife. "My Lucretia told me as Aunt Alice laughed quite cheerily whene'er hoo parted wi' a chest or a table. 'Lord ha' mercy!' hoo would say. 'Whatten a digeshion mun mine be, when I can eat solid öak, coovered wi' beeswax an' turps, as readily as a younger ooman can eat Bakewell puddin's!' Such sperrit ha' the Pirrittys! Lucretia, hoo once carried her a basket o' banty's eggs—laid by a pullet as hoo weere vastly proud o'—an' begged Aunt Alice to accept 'em. Theere weere summat stirrin' then—the owd ooman begged her to tak' 'em whöame, for on no account could hoo ha' such a gift. Lucretia saw hoo looked very thin an' peaked, an' so hoo begged an' prayed—sayin' as hoo'd saved 'em all on purpose. Aunt Alice cried, hoo did, an' kissed my wife, an' said as hoo'd gi'e way; but next mornin' hoo came to our door wi' the basket, an' in it theere weere a little owd blue-an'-white cup an' saucer, made in the days afore handles weere used. So, since 'twere worth ten times moore nor the eggs, Lucretia daredna gi'e her owt else. 'Tis a failin'—the Pirritty pride—but 'tis a grand failin'."

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"Martha Drabble said as 'tweere pitiful to look at Aunt Alice's cottage now," said Chapman. "Everything's gone, save a tent-bedstead, all worrum-eäten, an' a chaff bed an' a three-legged table, an' one rush-bottomed chair, an' the pair o' pot dogs. Hoo's held out as long as hoo could, an' now hoo's goin' to the Bastille!"

As he spoke, a smart dogcart drew up before the inn. It held four people—a young groom, a middle-aged woman, and a girl and boy. The woman, who was stout and fair, and comely of feature, wore a widow's veil and a richly trimmed black silk mantle. She was brimful of importance, kindly contemptuous of the noisy country holiday-makers. The children were stolid and impassive of countenance; the boy wore very prominent cuffs and collar and tight kid gloves; the girl's straw-coloured hair was neatly crimped.

Mrs Fearnehough, anticipating custom, signalled to the man in the taproom who performed the duties of ostler, then went to the door and greeted the arrivals with a friendly nod.

"Is Miss Pirritty's house near here?" said the widow. "I was told that you'd direct us to it."

The hostess opened her mouth to speak; then, giving a swift glance up the road,

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lifted her hand and pointed in the direction of an approaching figure.

"God be thanked if yo're a friend o' poor Alice!" she said fervently. "Theere hoo is, a-coomin' now."

A low-statured, round-shouldered old woman hobbled feebly down the hill. She was very neatly gowned in faded black, with a drawn silk bonnet, and a checked shawl. Her face was pale and withered; but the years had nowise dimmed the lustre of her dark eyes. Her teeth had long since disappeared, and her sharp chin played nut-crackers with a big Roman nose. One hand pressed heavily upon the handle of a cumbrous gingham umbrella; the other held a little bundle tied in a snowy cotton handkerchief. It was known afterwards that this bundle contained a stuffed canary, resting on a blue-john perch, which had been part of her mother's paraphernalia, and a cast-iron tobacco box, the one her father had always used. She was smiling courageously, and nodding to some women who caught their breaths; if she realised the sadness of her position she was evidently determined to give no sign.

The widow from the town frowned slightly as she noted her eccentric aspect. She had never been told that Alice Pirritty was peculiar to look upon—indeed, the dead man had ever shunned any mention of his family

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connections, and had never expressed any desire to revisit the scene of his youthful days. But although she was stolid by nature, she was not without good feeling; she determined to show no disappointment because of the good woman's unexpected look of poverty-strickenness.

Mrs Fearnough ran eagerly forward to meet her old friend, almost stumbling in her haste.

"Theere's a lady coome askin' for yo'," she cried. "Theere she be."

Alice Pirritty moved as sedately as her bowed figure would permit to the side of the dogcart. The widow held out a plump hand, which the spinster seemed not to see.

"I ask your pardon, ma'am," she said; "but I dunna recall your face."

"Why, you're not likely to," replied the other, "seeing as you and I have never met before. I'm Mrs Badger, your poor step-brother James's wife."

Alice shook her hand now; but the pleasure the newcomer anticipated was lacking in her expression: she appeared perfectly indifferent, casting a look towards the Nether End, through which she was to proceed on her journey. "Poor James died four months ago," continued the widow, lifting her handkerchief to her eyes. "He left me and the children very comfortable. I hadn't your

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address, or be sure I'd have written bidding you to the burying. Consumption it was—he suffered horrible with his chest. . . . Nine weeks in bed. . . . I'd scarce an hour's rest all the time."

The old woman had winced. "I'm very sorry to hear't," she murmured. "I'd the lookin' after him when he weere a lad. Did he ne'er spëak o' me?"

"Very seldom," sighed the widow. "He seemed as if he wanted to forget Milton, so I never drew him to the subject. When he was at the last, he said I was to come and look you up, and if you wanted anything to let you have it."

"He weerena a Pirritty," said old Alice, half to herself.

"I thought perhaps you'd give us a cup of tea at your house," suggested Mrs Badger, who saw the curious farmers peeping over the garden hedge. "It has been a long, dusty drive from town."

The withered skin flushed scarlet. "I'm afeard I canna," said the old woman. "I'm bound to be i' Bakewell afore six o'clock."

The widow's placid temper was slightly ruffled. "Well, if you can't, you can't," she said. "I'll write asking you to spend a day or two at Christmas with us. These here are James's children, Lucy and John Henry."

The spinster did not heed the introduction.

THE PIRRITTY PRIDE

“Yo’d best none write,” she said. “I couldna coome, an’ I shallna be wi’out coomp’ny.” And without another word she passed on.

BECK AT THE PLAY

BLEAKLOW HOLLOW, old Mrs Hattersley's farm, lies in a concave of the East Moor, near where the twin Burbages join their waters for a wild dance down to the swift Darrand. There is no other habitation in sight, and only from the upper windows can a glimpse be caught of aught save the green fields that surround the homestead. In Rebecca's chamber a small square of diamond panes, set in black bands of lead, commands the finest view; thence one may see the moor curving, rising to rocky edges, sinking abruptly, then growing steeper and steeper until it is crowned by Kinderscout itself. Sometimes when the girl was dressing, she would rest her elbows on the blue-washed sill and press her eager face to the glass and wonder about the world beyond. The grandmother often spoke of a country that lay west of the mountains. "First comes the sea," she said, "a vast piece o' wayter, big enew to flood the Darrand valley ten times ower; then there's Ireland, where owd Bartle lives. A grand place is Ireland;

BECK AT THE PLAY

he's told me many an' many a time as 'tis far better nor the Pëak. But whatten I wonder is why the coountry lads læave it to help wi' our harvest—when they'd best be gettin' o' theer own?"

There is an old packhorse track running midway through Bleaklow Hollow: it traverses the Moor between Speckled Pole and Fox Pole, ancient landmarks that have stood from time immemorial. It was along this path that William Pinder, of Woodseats, came a-courting. He was one of the duke's keepers, and his home was a square, high-gabled lodge on the south side of the hill, known as Lord's Seat, which rises four miles away beside the chief tributary of the young Darrand. For the last three years (ever since his old mother's death) he had lived there in solitude, all the while looking forward to the day when Rebecca would bring her mind to accepting him as her husband. A pensive man, slow of thought and slow of action; moreover, a great reader of such books as his mother (who before her marriage had kept a dame's school) had brought to the lonely house.

These were L'Estrange's "Fables of Æsop," the novels of Mrs Sherwood, the queer country romance known as "The Farmer of Inglewood Forest," and also a complete edition, with f's for s's, of the works of Samuel Richardson. During the old

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woman's later years he had entertained her nightly with a letter writ by the marvellous Pamela, or a chapter of "Sir Charles Grandison." Whilst the mother lived, no thought of wedlock ever entered his brain; and now, when in his twenty-ninth year, he sought a wife for the first time, his big forehead was lined, and his hair lightly flecked with grey. In Rebecca's company he was more silent than when elsewhere; but his eyes sparkled very brightly as he watched the beautiful girl moving deftly about her grandmother's house. He was well-to-do; he brought her many little presents, beginning with a cottage made of gaudy-coloured shells, intended for a chimney-piece ornament. Rebecca had not appreciated this according to its value as a work of art. Afterwards he chose fine silk handkerchiefs, trinkets of "blue-john"—the Peakland jewel—set in silver, and once a wonderful gauze fan—a souvenir of an exhibition in a manufacturing town forty miles away.

Rebecca's life had been absolutely devoid of exciting incidents. Now that matrimony loomed in the near distance, she began to crave for something to happen—something coming from the outer world—north, east, south or west—anywhere beyond the confines of the moor. Thus it fell about that one evening in early summer, when William came as usual, but disclosed some remarkable news,

BECK AT THE PLAY

her heart gave a glad bound, and the rich blood rose to her cheeks.

"I've summat to tell yo', Mrs Hattersley," he said, "an', more nor that, summat to ask. Yo' rec'lect my sister Alice, her as married a brewer i' Leicestershire when I weere a little lad? Ay, I thowt yo' would. Yo' mind as hoo deed i' childbed? Hoo left a lad bairn, an' whatten d' yo' think?"

The old lady meditated for a while, then shook her head. "I'm sure I dunna know," she said, lamely.

Rebecca came to lean upon the back of the arm-chair.

"Well," he continued, "I weere just sittin' down to my dinner this morn when a dogcart pulled up at my door, an' out jumps a lad o' twenty-two, a good-like lad, wi'out a hair on his face, an' dressed up to the nines! I weere all mazed when he caught my hands an' says as pat as may be: 'Yo're my Uncle William!'"

"Eh dear! eh dear!" cried Mrs Hattersley; "an' 'tweere Alice's babby growed to manhood!"

"Yo're right, 'tweere my nevvv Percy—the name bein' gi'en to him by his mother's wish. Alice's husband weere proud-minded: after the poor lass went whōame he ne'er as much as sent word whether the child lived or deed, an' when my mother wrote he wouldna notice her letters. Yo' see, he weere makin' money,

BECK AT THE PLAY

an' belike weere ashamed o' us. Onyhow, the lad's gotten no false pride about him—he seemed right down glad to see me, an' when we'd put up the horse he came in an' ate brëad an' cheese wi' me."

"He did but whatten weere right," said Mrs Hattersley warmly; "bein' as yo're o' his own flesh an' blood. An', after all, his feyther weere only a brewer."

"Ay," replied William, "but the lad's none a brewer. He's gotten his feyther's money (Mester Barker bein' dead), an' if he would he might live like a gentleman. 'Stead o' thatten, he felt as he mun be workin' soomehow, an' ha'in' a fancy for play-actin' he went on the stage."

"Lord save us!" exclaimed the dame. "One o' them who go about wi' a tent?"

"Nay," said William. "Theere's no need for him to do that—he's wi' a coomp'ny as visits the best thëatres, an' he taks the lëadin' parts for men. I ha' na' been i' a thëatre mysen; but he described it to me, so well as if 'tweere afoore my eyen. An' the long an' the short o' 'tweere as he finished up by sayin' as I mun go to Hathton on Saturday night, an' he's a-goin' to send me tickets for a front sëat."

He caught sight of Rebecca's eager eyes, and nodded meaningly.

"I told him as if I went I shouldna go

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alöane. D' yo' think, Mrs Hattersley, as—as Beck might coome too?"

The grandmother's lips puckered; she began to frown. Rebecca put her palms under the double chin, and gave her a hearty kiss.

"Yo' munna forbid," she said. "'Tisna oft I ask for owt, an I'd vastly like to go. 'Twould be easy enew—William could drive the owd mare."

Mrs Hattersley yielded with a sigh.

"I dunna see how I can refuse," she said, "seein' as 'tis William's nevvvy. But I do pray an' trust as yo'll none be set on thèatre-goin' i' the future."

Now that the matter was settled, William was delighted to find his sweetheart more cordial than she had ever been. For the remainder of the evening he was less restrained than usual, and he responded quite lengthily to Mrs Hattersley's inquiries concerning everything the young man had done and said.

Yet, as he returned along the worn pack-horse track to his lonely house, a touch of sadness overcame him, and his whistling, which at first had been surprisingly gay, became of a sudden melancholy in the extreme.

He had seen little more of the world than had Rebecca; but his life had been full of perfect sympathy with nature in all her moods. He loved the moor with a passion

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almost as great as that aroused by the beautiful girl. He craved for nought more than to spend his years amongst the heather and the rushes; he could imagine no setting more perfect for Rebecca's loveliness. And yet—and yet there came to him a fear that the glamour of an artificial life might prove over-fascinating—that she might leave him and the moor for ever.

The maidens most admired in Peakland are buxom and rosy, with dark brown hair and pouting lips. Rebecca was slight and pale; her tresses were yellow as the silver birch leaves in autumn. Her deep grey eyes were given to dreaming, and her movements were always quiet; although Mrs Hattersley spoke the truth when she declared that in all her seventy years' experience she had never known as good a worker. She had dainty little hands; but she used them well—the butter and the cheese made at Bleaklow Hollow were noted for their excellence.

That night he slept ill, tossing restlessly in his four-poster. A thousand odd fancies came to him; he saw Rebecca moving in a different—a loftier sphere than his own; he saw a smile of radiant happiness on her face as she acknowledged the admiration of crowds. More than once he woke suddenly with a loud groan; and long before dawn he rose and tramped across the moor, only

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returning when the sun had drunk the dew from the topmost blades of grass.

The postman called during the morning with a letter from the actor, enclosing an order for a private box. When Saturday came, William arranged for an under-keeper to attend to his duties, and, soon after dinner, began to prepare himself for the evening.

First he took from the press his best suit, which was made of smooth old-fashioned broadcloth, the coat ending in a quaint swallow-tail. It had been bought for his mother's funeral, and had lain in lavender ever since. There were deep creases everywhere; when he donned it, he viewed his reflection with singular dismay. In these garments he looked considerably older than his years, and, moreover, presented a ludicrous resemblance to a local preacher, about to hold forth at a Woodlands love-feast.

This would never do for a visit to the theatre; he must certainly choose something less lugubrious. He thought of a suit of rich green velveteen, intended for the last twelfth of August, and never worn, because, at the last moment, he had feared the colour was too striking for a man of his position. It was well-made by a Hatton tailor, and, best of all, it would be new to Rebecca. So, after a very brief consideration, he discarded the black and dressed in this; finally putting

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on a stiffly-starched collar and a neckcloth of dark red silk, besprinkled with a pattern of tiny ivy-leaves. After the first glance at the mirror, he dared look no more; the change of garments had made him appear scarce older than a lad of twenty-five. He fastened the smoked pearl buttons of his gaiters hurriedly, and, fearful lest he should lose courage and determine upon something else, he locked the house-door, and set off in the direction of Bleaklow Hollow.

Rebecca gave a little cry of surprise when she recognised him in his unaccustomed finery; then she greeted him with such warmth that he was almost tempted to risk everything by kissing her there and then. She herself was attired more prettily than usual, although at all times she wore clothes that fitted her pretty figure admirably well. This afternoon she had chosen a white muslin gown (she had worn it only once before, when she played bridesmaid to the daughter of a moorland farmer), and a white hat with pink tea-roses. She reminded him of the fragile anemone that grows in springtime amidst the grass of hill-country copses.

She held a spray of forget-me-nots in her hand. "I've gathered 'em for yo'," she said. "Let me pin 'em i' yor buttonhole."

Old Mrs Hattersley laughed gleefully. "Dear yeart!" she cried. "Whatten a fine couple yo' do make, to be sure! 'Tis for all

BECK AT THE PLAY

the world like to a coloured almanac! Now, William, yo' do look hot—happen 'tis wi' the walk—so yo'll ha' a cup o' tea wi' Beck an' me afore startin'."

She was extraordinarily alert to-day; she made them sit together on the window-seat while she boiled the water and cut bread-and-butter and cake.

"Yo' see," she exclaimed, "I dunna want Beck to soil her gown or her hands. Now, just yo' stay wi' William, wench, an' let yor gran'mother show as hoo's none altogether useless. By Marry! it makes me young again to see yo' together."

Her mirth fretted the girl; her brightness disappeared, and for the next two hours she was as quiet as William was wont to be. This change of mood fretted the lover; he ceased to finger his waistcoat pocket, in which, carefully folded in tissue paper, lay the costliest present he had ever bought. He had meant to offer this for her acceptance as they drove over the moor behind the staid old mare, whose pace had never been known to exceed a jog-trot of five miles an hour.

The rest of the evening always seemed like a dream to William Pinder. They drove to the "Yellow Lion," in the heart of Hathton, where they left the vehicle and strolled leisurely up the High Street. Rebecca had never been in the town on a Saturday evening;

BECK AT THE PLAY

the crowd flurried her—almost involuntarily she laid her hand on his arm.

At the theatre they left the soft twilight—a faint new moon hung overhead—and entered a vestibule brilliant with electric lamps. A man in livery conducted them up several flights of stairs to a box hung with gold-fringed crimson velvet curtains, where they drew back their chairs into the shade, and sat in awed silence. After a while Rebecca moved near the barrier, and looked timidly downward, but returned instantly, scared by the sight of so many strange faces.

The orchestra began to play. William tried, bravely enough, to catch the tune, and beat time with lightly touching hands; but the music soon ceased unexpectedly, and the curtain rose, revealing a modern drawing-room, full of finely dressed men and women. They spoke a jargon incomprehensible to the country girl; still, the gaiety of the picture attracted her, and soon she boldly shifted her chair to the front of the box.

It was a vastly popular comedy, adapted from the French. The nephew (William touched her shoulder and whispered when he first appeared) played the hero, a dashing young adventurer of loose morals. Rebecca watched him very curiously, turning now and then to compare his appearance with that of the man at her side; but soon she became

BECK AT THE PLAY

interested in the proceedings of the women, who each fought with her tongue to win him for herself.

As the curtain fell at the end of the first act, however, a revulsion came, and she leaned forward to where William sat.

"I dunna care much for their goin's-on," she whispered. "'T seems to me as they're no better nor they should be—some o' 'em."

She was interrupted by the entrance of the actor, whom William introduced with old-fashioned punctilio. Off the stage he appeared nothing more than a handsome lad, with a genuinely kind manner. He thanked them for coming, and made a few pleasant remarks; then, as he had little time to spare, he prepared to return to his dressing-room.

"Why not come and have supper with me at my hotel?" he said. "By Jove! Uncle William, I congratulate you on the aunt you're going to give me!"

But William, reading reluctance in Rebecca's eyes, declined very courteously, and the actor, after shaking hands, retired in haste.

Then the play continued, growing frothier and frothier with every speech.

At last Rebecca sat with closed eyes, and William moved his chair so that he saw nought save the beautiful girl whom he loved. And when "God save the Queen" was played, they stole away from the place and made their way to the inn.

BECK AT THE PLAY

The sky was now darkly blue, the crescent moon shone very brightly; only two or three stars were visible. Rebecca spoke not a word until they were beyond the suburbs of Hathton. Then William saw that her cheeks were all wet with tears.

"Dall it, my pretty!" he cried. "Whatten's vexed yo'?"

She smiled for the first time since they had left home. "I canna tell," she said gently, "onless it be disappointment. The world's vastly different fro' whatten I thowt. I've larned as there's no place like the moor. Yo' an' me, William, weere ne'er made for town life."

He took her hand. "Yo' didna know as yo're akin to the wild birds!" he murmured. "Oh, Beck, my lass, I do loove yo' for them words!"

And when Rebecca lifted her hand she saw encircling one finger a little jewelled ring.

POOR JOE

FRONTING Milton Green, to the left of the old standards of the stocks, where, within living memory, evil-doers were pinned by the legs, stands Mrs Joe Walton's cottage, a pretty little place with arched windows which the village folk call "The Chapel house." The stonework of the front is entirely concealed by creepers—jasmine and clematis—and in summer white convolvulus festoons the latticed porch. In fair weather, a magpie in a wicker cage hangs near the door (crying "Jack! Jack!" to all who pause), and an obese tabby, with marks of Persian descent, lies purring on the threshold.

There is an atmosphere of perfect peace about the place. One associates the dainty cleanliness with serene old age, unmarred by any trouble. And if a glimpse be caught of Mrs Joe sitting beside her window, knitting cloth hearthrugs for her poorer neighbours, her bland face lighted with a patient smile, one longs for the art of the sentimental almanack painter.

The young students at the Dissenters' College

POOR JOE

on Darrand bank often visit her; she brews tea well and makes pleasant cakes strongly flavoured with pudding-spice. When she expects them, she spreads freshly-washed hopsacks over the parlour carpet, and places a comfortable kneeling hassock near each arm-chair. She is, moreover, one of the most generous women in the parish; innocent children unblushingly ask her for halfpence whenever they meet her out-of-doors.

Matrons uphold her as the phoenix of her sex; there's no better creature to be found for the performance of the first and last duty to humankind. The menfolk, however, view her with a less favourable regard; for this her next-door neighbour, Pym Slack, an unmarried retired cobbler, is alone responsible. More than ten years have passed since this couple last held converse; but even to-day the good woman offers a petition that Pym's wicked heart may be changed. He has been heard to say that he hopes he may die of a sudden, lest in his weakness she might minister to his departing moments.

Every third month Pym makes a long journey for a man of his years, and for at least a week following each return wears a perplexed and uneasy countenance. It is well known that he goes to Derby to see his old crony, Joe, who has spent ten years, and will probably spend the remainder of his life, in the county asylum. And after his latest visit,

POOR JOE

some few days ago, he was moved to speak plainly of Joe's tragedy. I had met him taking the air along the ridge-road, and he had very politely accepted a pipeful of tobacco.

"Ay, mester," he said, "I've been frettin' about Joe, tho' Lord knows why I should, for he seems comfortable enew, poor lad."

Then his smile quivered away, and, turning aside, he drew a red-and-white cotton handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped his eyes.

"I'm full up," he remarked, in a broken voice. "Poor Joe! poor, poor Joe!"

My house being near by, I invited him to enter, and whilst he sipped from a big tumbler of what he called "brown cream," but what is known in more genteel circles as Jamaica rum, he told me the following story:—

"I've always had my doubts about his brains softenin', but now I doubt no more. Joe's as clear-yeaded a chap as lives onywheere. When he weere put away I said as much to his wife; but hoo cocked her eyen an' mumbled summat about the will o' Providence, an' then we brangled an' hoo bade me ne'er spëak to her ony more. . . .

"Yo' see, him an' me had been friends for well-nigh fifty year afore he married Hannah, who'd lived servant wi' the Squire e'er sin' I can rec'lect, an' had saved a good bit o' money. None as Joe wanted the money tho', for he'd gotten more o' his own, thro' heirin', an' like-

POOR JOE

wise thro' whatten he'd put by out o' his earnins i' makin' clöathes for all Milton parish. An' I'll none say as Hannah weereena coomely; for hoo weere the same as hoo is now, havin' scarce changed for the last thretty year. Hoo's i' soome respects one o' the kindest an' thriftiest bodies yo' could meet onywhere.

"The faut weere i' two fowk as had kept single for so long e'er gettin' wed at all. 'Tweere to be expected as both weere set i' theer ways, an' yo' know as well as onyone as bachelors' ways arena the same as owd maids' ways. He'd lived alöane for so long that he'd gotten to care nowt whether the house weere clëan or dirty, or whether he'd a cloth on the table at meal-times or none. I will say, tho', as whene'er he stirred out o' doors he weere always dressed very smart, wi' his shoon well-blacked, an' his collars white as driven snow. But at such times as none but his friends could see him, he looked vastly different—his breeches all ragged, no coat on, but a knitted vest, an' his slippers down at heel, an' grëat holes i' his stockins. But all the same, he weere the cheeriest an' the merriest lad as I e'er did know.

"I used for to warn him, whilst he coorted Hannah, as hoo'd mak' a change i' all that, an' poor Joe he'd laugh an' say: 'Loove blinds a ooman,' tho' afterwards he'd add: 'Hannah's gotten an eye as'll draw a duck off the wayter!'"

POOR JOE

“To my thinkin’ ’twere a grëat mistak’ i’ Joe none to make th’ ooman coome an’ look at the house afoore they went to church together. He did mention it, so he tow’d me; but Hannah seemed shy, an’ talked soome stuff about it none bein’ proper for her to go, so he said no more. Yo’ mun onderstand as hoo cared for proper things more nor for owt else i’ life. But I hold as if hoo’d seen the condition the house weere in, hoo’d ha’ bruk the engagement theere an’ then.

“None as poor Joe didna strive his best to put things i’ order. For a whole fortnight afore the weddin’ he swept an’ yaller-washed, an’ made all (to those who weerena curious) as bright as a new pin. If I said as he didna hide away mucky floor-clouts an’ such like i’ the drawers aside o’ the new linen he’d bought, ’twould be a lee: still, ’twere done more thro’ thowtlessness nor owt else.

“But when parson had made ’em man an’ wife, an’ they came whöame after a few days spent wi’ Joe’s sister i’ the Woodlands, Hannah declared, gently enew, as the spot weerna fit for a pig to bide in, an’ began riddin’ things out wi’ a vengeance. An’ for a full month hoo did nowt but clëan an’ clëan an’ clëan. Joe said as ’twere surprisin’ what a mort o’ dust an’ flew had drifted into the corners. He weere none very coomfortable, to be sure; but he used for to chuckle an’ say, ‘New brooms sweep clean,’ an’ oother owd proverbs.

POOR JOE

“Hannah ne’er grum’led—I will gie her that credit—but went about wi’ a stricken look, just as if soomebody near akin lay a-deein’. Hoo weere very patient—on the surface—I dunna b’lieve as all the while they kep’ house together, hoo gied him as much as a hard word. But all that time hoo weere settin’ things straight, hoo weere makin’ up her mind about the future; an’ once hoo’d made up her mind, none all the prayers i’ the world’ld change her.

“At last the job weere done, an’ the Chapel House made as ’tis now, wi’ white lace curtains an’ blinds an’ pots o’ fuchsias i’ the windows, an’ antimacassars on every chair. An’ one night, just afore Kirsmas, Joe cam’ in to see me, smock-faced, an’ tremblin’ like a læaf. ‘Pym,’ says he, ‘I’m i’ grëat trouble o’ mind,’ an’ then he fairly beldered, loud as a toothin’ babby.

“’Tweere a good bit afore I could mak’ out whatten weere wrong; but after he’d had a sup o’ yale, I learned as he’d gone indoors wi’ muddy feet, an’ made a few stains on the house-place floor.

“Hannah didna open her mouth, but laid a hand on his showder, an’ pointed to the mat as lay aside o’ the door; then, seein’ as he weere gapin’ foolishly, hoo very calmly marched him back an’ made him clëan every atom o’ dirt fro’ his shoon. An’ when he got i’ his chair by the hearth, hoo found an owd newspaper,

POOR JOE

an' set it under the soles, so as the rug shouldna be soiled. Poor Joe, he sat for a few minutes dazed like, then up he gets an' makes for me. Hannah ne'er fancied his coomin' after that—I reckon he told her whatten I said about lettin' a ooman wear the breeches.

“A man mun be a man an' none a mouse—I told him that scores o' times. But he weere timid by nayture, an' there's no gettin' ower that. An' the upshot o' it all weere, as for a twelvemoonth Joe lived like a wax flower under a glass shade.

“Hannah weere fond o' him, there's no gainsayin' that; but as time passed, her care grew more nor he could stand, an' bein' a whöame-bred, an' none a tavern-tattler, he began to mope, an' had scarce a word for ony o' his owd companions. Lord! I've seen him sittin' there coovered wi' a dust-sheet, whilst Hannah swept up the ashes—which hoo did about onct i' every three hours!

“An' at last hoo got into the way o' mimimowkin' at fowk—pullin' such wry faces as yo' ne'er did see! Sometimes he'd burst into song—hymns 'tweere—an' then stop short wi' a cackle. Doctor Hancock (he'd only been i' Milton a few moonths) heerd him at it, an' said as 'tweere melinky madness; so i' coorse o' time Joe weere sent to the 'sylum—though Hannah, to do her justice, begged 'em to let him be.”

POOR JOE

Pym had drunk all his rum; he drew out his handkerchief again, and mopped his streaming eyes.

"Oh, dall it!" he said. "Poor Joe! poor Joe! I've always jealoused as he weerena so mad as they thowt, an' t'other day, when I went to see him, I found pluck enew to tell him so. (He has nowt to complain o' theere, seein' as he's paid for, an' they let him ha' plenty o' liberty.) After I'd said it, he button-holed me, an' laughed as cheery as ony lad.

"'I weerena cracked one jot,' says he; 'but I soon should ha' been if I'd stayed. I couldna i' decency leave her ony other way. I sham a bit soometimes, for fear they'd send me back else. But yo' munna tell Hannah, none on no account.'"

THE COURTSHIP OF MRS WHITECROFT

MRS WHITECROFT sat in an old - fashioned wicker chair beside the moss - grown grit-stone wall of her garden. The widow was very comely of face, and plump as a partridge. Her mourning for Samuel, whose second wife she had been for six years, was now modified to a chaste lilac; a small bow of black and grey ribbon was coquettishly pinned above her left ear. Twelve months had elapsed since the good man had been put to bed beside the yew tree in Milton churchyard, and the loneliness of her position had begun to tell upon her spirits. That afternoon, as she had donned her new gown for the first time, she had shed a few tears because of her intended disloyalty to his memory.

"He weere good," she said, "an' very good; but 'tis a comfort to me as when we talked ower the future, a few days afore he passed, I said as I weerena cut out by natyure for livin' alöane, an' when I'd paid my respects to his mem'ry, I'd be 'bliged to take another

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mate! An' he made no to-do, bein' as he'd wedded one afore me."

It was a hot July afternoon, and the air was heavy with thunder. In the fields beyond the garden, whence the hay-crop had been successfully gathered, the swallows dipped so low that their breasts almost touched the ground. And the warmth at last overcame Mrs Whitecroft, so that the long white stocking she was darning fell gently to her lap, and her head sank to the chintz-covered cushion of her chair-back. She slept peacefully, her mouth closed and her pretty chin tilted, and she dreamed that she was in her maidenhood again, frolicking with a young man at Grassbrook Feast.

Jim Whittingham, her head-man, found her thus, when he returned from Calton-in-the-Water Fair, where he had sold to advantage some of the widow's young stock. He was a tall, brown-skinned lad, with shy blue eyes and a thoughtful forehead—a second cousin of Samuel's, who had lived at Moorend Farm since his childhood. His reputation as a steady bachelor was immaculate, and she relied much on his sobriety and excellent business ability.

But this afternoon the tantalising heat had entered his blood, and an unaccustomed draught of home-brewed beer at the "Bold Cloudesley" had stolen away his brains and left him in order for any childish mischief.

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Besides, not even a woman-hater could have denied that the slumbering widow made a pretty picture.

He climbed the wall from the lane very quietly, and stood gazing upon her face; then, breaking off a sucker that grew from the root of a young sycamore, he lightly flicked her smooth cheek. Her dream, affected by the touch, took on such a delightful turn that her mouth parted just enough to show a line of little white teeth. In another moment, Jim stooped and gave her a kiss full on the lips—then drew back in sudden horror, sobered by his unaccountable presumption.

Mrs Whitecroft's eyes opened; she flushed crimson. "Whatten be yo' a-doin' o', James Whitt'am?" she inquired angrily.

His face had grown very pale. "Theere weere a wasp," he stammered, holding out the twig,—“a wasp settlin' on yor nether lip. I twitched him off just in time.”

The widow recovered her temper at sight of his confusion. "Drat 'em!" she said, "'tis the worst summer I've e'er knowed for wasps! Thank yo' kindly, James."

He told her of the sale of the beasts, and gave her the money-bag, and shamefacedly hastened to the stable-yard; she rose and went into the house. She was still warmer of colour than was natural.

"Of all th' thowts!" she said. "Me drëamin'

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as Jonty Middleton weere bussin' me at Grassbrook leppin's, an' 'tweere but James drivin' a wasp off me! I'm more nor thankful as I didna let out whatten my mind weere on!"

She went out again and broke another bough of sycamore, and stroked her lips with it, but shook her head and frowned as if she nowise understood. And Jim, who was conscience-stricken, kept out of her way that evening, lest she might read the guilt in his face.

On the following Sunday evening, three suitors for the widow's hand called at Moor-end. They had fluttered about her for several months; but she had resented their coming so soon after her bereavement, and had given them to understand that they must not repeat their proposals for a whole year. The eldest was Frank Eades, of Barley Paddocks; the second, Thomas Pursglove, of Milton Four-Lane-Ends; and the third, young William Morley, of Little Chatsworth. All men of considerable means, and all suitable in the matter of moral character and domestic habits. But the types were too familiar to be piquant, and Mrs Whitecroft was given to flouting each mercilessly. She showed no difference in her recognition of their claims, and varied but slightly in her inhumanity. As it fell out, they all arrived at the same time, just as the bells of Milton Church were beginning to call worshippers to evening

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service ; and, once seated in her big parlour, each displayed no sign of retiring to leave his rivals in the field.

Mrs Whitecroft was very light-headed that evening ; nothing seemed to give her pleasure. To Eades, whose appearance was not as trim as his fellows', she quoted the old advice for men whose minds were set on courting : " Ne'er go a-wooin' when the beard's a-growin'," and she likened Pursglove's nose to a rum-bottle ; and as Morley began to chuckle with the belief that she favoured him most, she declared a powerful aversion to " smock-faced " lads, which silenced him until the time when she dismissed them by asking if they purposed to stay all night, " for if so," she added, " I mun ha' the sheets aired, for yo' all to lig i' the best bed, which hasna been used since Samuel deed ! "

When they were gone, she stole gently to the house-place, where Jim Whittingham sat before the hearth with his book. The old woman who had spent all her life in the service of the Whitecrofts was dozing in her chair, and the young girl who helped her with the indoor work sat at the table beside the cow-lad, sharing his studies of *The Song of Solomon*. The widow sighed audibly, then she went away, shaking her head in self-reproof.

In the week that followed, she grew oddly restless, and towards the end decided to try

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a change of air. Her only sister had wedded a farmer in Cheshire; she determined to go over on the Saturday and stay for a few days. She could very easily be spared at Moorend; for Samuel had always insisted upon her living, as he said, "like a lady born," and since his death she had seen no need for taking an active part in the management.

Whittingham drove her to Miller's Dale in the new dogcart. As he saw her safely into the train, she marvelled somewhat at the quiet courtesy of his manner. He was her junior by four years—she remembered him as a hobbledehoy, and familiarity had bred indifference. As the train was starting she offered him her hand, and allowed herself to feel the grasp of his strong fingers longer than the occasion demanded.

"Yo'll be sure an' write every day to tell me how things go on a-whöame?" she said. "I've ne'er had a letter fro' yo', an' 'twill cheer me up."

"Ay, ma'am," said he, "I'll be glad to write."

The train moved from the platform, and Whittingham stood watching till it was out of sight. Some kindly impulse prompted Mrs Whitecroft to lean from the window and shake a white handkerchief with a narrow black border. Jim left the station mournfully, and let the mare return to Moorend at her own pace.

"I dunna know how I dare think o' such

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a thing," he muttered. "My missus is the looveliest ooman as I e'er did see, an', moore-ower, as rich as onybody i' all Milton parish!"

Then he began to whistle so pathetically, that an old woman at the wayside (she was gathering dandelion roots for her liver-complaint) was moved to tears.

"'Tis loove, an' loove wi'out ony hope in't, as makes a chap whizzle like that!" she sighed.

Meanwhile Mrs Whitecroft was being borne towards Cheshire. No sooner had she changed stations at Buxton, when she regretted having left home. Her feelings were in a decidedly interesting condition, and she began to fear the turmoil of her sister's large family. If it would not have looked foolish, she would certainly have returned post-haste to Moorend.

When she reached the large farm-house, which in its day had been an important hall, her humour had become so melancholy that her sister, fearing that she was still grieving for the dead Samuel, took her to her bosom and bade her be of good cheer, since fine fish still remained in the sea.

"That is so," said the widow, petulantly; "but I'm sick o' the thought o' men! Now, for Lord's sake! Emma, yo' let me be. I've coome to yo' for a rest, an' none for advice, an' I'm goin' to bother about nowt."

Nevertheless, when Whittingham's first

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letter arrived, her eyes sparkled, and she declined to open it until she was in the solitude of her chamber.

"Dear Madam," he had written, "You told me to let you know all as went on, so I take up the pen to write. Collier's young bullocks got into the oats yestereven, and ate till they swelled like fuzz-balls, and there was talk of having them tapped. Told Collier as he will have to pay for the damage they've done, and it must be valued. A hen as sat astray came back to the fowl-yard with a brood of thirteen——"

"Dear, dear!" exclaimed the widow, "I did think as he'd write a more comforting letter!" Then she continued to read. "Cochins they are, and strong on their legs. Mr Eades and Mr Pursglove and young Mr Morley came up yesterday (Sunday) and were sadly bedone to find you gone away. They would have no naysay, but sat in the parlour drinking ale—I gave them some as is being saved for vinegar—for three full hours. Very branglesome they were."

The widow chuckled. "Yo' did right, James, lad; I hope it gave 'em stomach-yek!" she muttered.

"And going down the lane, Mr Eades and Mr Pursglove had some words, and came to blows, whilst Mr Morley cleared out of the road. I had to run and part them—they'd been betting as to which'd get you."

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She pursed her lips and nodded curiously. "Happen nayther!" she said.

"They turned on me; but I showed them something. It is a dull house without you; there's not one of your folk but longs for you back again. When you are away everything seems very different. That you may soon and safely return is the true wish of your respectful servant,

JAMES WHITTINGHAM."

When she had perused it thrice, she folded the sheet into a small square, and hid it in her bodice, just above her heart. That night she slept with it beneath her pillow, and waking at daybreak read it carefully again. Her sister, entering the chamber as she prepared to go downstairs for breakfast, found her flushed and smiling.

"Yo've been ha'in' plëasant drëams, I reckon," she said. "Lord! yo' look as fresh as a young maid!"

The next letter, which came that same morning, pleased the widow still more, and her spirits rose so high that she frolicked with her nephews and nieces as boisterously as if she were of their own age. On the Saturday, however, she wore a wry face, and declared that the post had brought tiresome news, and that she must return to Moorend at once.

"It seems to me as if everything weere

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goin' wrong a-whöame," she said. "I'm loth to go; but a house is nowt wi'out a missus always on the spot."

Her sister laughed meaningly. "Ay," she said, "yo' weere always one to bother, yo' weere. I can see thro' yo', Betty, an' I know there's mischief i' yor mind. Out wi' it—yo' can surely tell me all there is to tell?"

"There's nowt at all," said the widow, composedly. "How yo' do but worry me! Let me be, prythee—there's all my packin' to be done, an' a telegraph to be sent to Moorend, so as the trap'll meet me."

Later in the day, as she passed through Buxton, she called at a tobacconist's and purchased a handsome meerschaum pipe, and when Jim was driving her up Tideswell Dale, she drew it from her hand-bag.

"'Tis a little present as I got for yo'," she said. "I canna bear to see yo' suckin' at them mucky clays. An' when yo' smöake it, think o' the giver."

"Why," exclaimed Jim, "I'm always thinkin' o' yo', ma'am! . . . Yo' see, bein' a servant o' yors, 'tis my duty to look after yor interests."

"Ay, I know that, in course," she said hastily, "an' none can say as yo' ha'na done yor duty by the land since Mester Whitecroft deed. He always trusted yo', he did, an' likewise I shall. But yo' know, lad, soomeday yo'll be gettin' wedded an' leavin' Moorend."

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"I'll ne'er do that till I'm turned away, ma'am," he interrupted, "an' that'll be when yo' make up yor mind to one o' them as is coortin' yo'."

"An' that'll be ne'er!" she said, "so dunna spëak o't again. Now, Jim, lad, ha' yo' a ooman i' yor mind—yo' can tell me—I always like to hear such things?"

"Ay, I've gotten one," he replied sheepishly; "but I canna tell onybody. Yo'll excoose me, ma'am, but I hate to talk about my feelin's. 'Tis one as I've been fond o' for mony a long year."

"But yo' mun out wi' it," she said, in an earnest voice. "'Tis onwise to loove i' secret. Theere's nowt worse—it turns a lad's brain. My mother hoo used always to say so."

Whittingham shook his head, and knowing him to be of an obstinate cast, she ceased to pursue the subject, and remained silent until they reached home. When she went upstairs to doff her travelling things, she stood a while before her mirror, gazing with comfortable satisfaction on the pretty reflection.

"Drat it!" she said, as she turned away. "He's a chap as'll ne'er dare to put the question, an' I should just sink into th' ground if I did it mysen! Yet that's whatten 'twill coome to if he doesna spëak. I doubt if I could choose better; Samuel weere that fond o' him always. He'd be real plëased if 'tweere to coome about—that I do know."

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On the following morning, before she dressed for church, she went down to the shippon, where Jim was milking. She stood for some minutes watching his shapely back as he swayed to the movements of a roan cow. He was whistling again—this time he had chosen a popular hymn.

"Well, lad," she said at last, startling him so that he nearly overturned the pail. "Ha' yo' settled to tell me about the wench?"

"Nay," he replied, shortly. "I wunna tell yo', an', whatten's more, I shanna tell her."

Mrs Whitecroft retired in high dudgeon. "'Tis onnatural!" she murmured. "I canna bide the very idea o't."

But that afternoon, after tea, as he sat on the bench in the stackyard, sunning himself, and smoking twist in his meerschaum, the widow watched him intently from behind the curtains of the parlour window, until she saw the pipe laid carefully aside, and the lad fall asleep, resting his head against the wall. And then, as there was nobody in sight she tripped out, taking in her right hand a withered sycamore bough, and kissed him on the moustache.

To her great consternation, his eyes opened before her face had withdrawn, and he sprang to his feet and caught her hands in his own. "Yo' dunna mäan——"

"'Tweere a wasp! she stammered.

"A wasp as læaves a sweet sting," he said.

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The widow's face, half-averted, had taken a very charming colour. "Lord!" she cried, "there be my three sweetyearts coomin' up the lane, an' I've gotten to tell 'em as they needna coome ony more!"

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AT the western end of Milton Dale, nigh to where the brook emerges from a low-pitched cavern, lies a platform of rough sward, sheltered from all winds save the south by a rough three-sided natural screen of grey limestone. The herbage here, from spring until late autumn, is somewhat marred with bluish-black discs, showing where the travelling folk have burned their outdoor fires; here and there lie small heaps of rusty tin shavings, or stubs of heather too short to be used for brooms. The broken wall that separates this resting-place from the road is more often than not seen covered with the family washing of a tinker, or a pot-salesman, or a shooting-gallery proprietor. Occasionally the neck of the Dale is odorous with the frying of onions, or the baking of saleable gingerbread in antiquated charcoal ovens.

Miss Mary Ansell, the wicker-weaver, had rested here briefly with her vans so many times that she believed herself possessed of a proprietary right. She journeyed twice a year through the Peak country, selling finely

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wrought baskets and hampers and easy-chairs. Down in Staffordshire she owned five acres of willow-marsh. The "round" was inherited from her father—she could relate how her grandfather travelled through Milton Dale with wicker-laden packhorses in the days when nought but a bridle-track ran from end to end.

It was not to be wondered at that when, early in the summer, her forehorse stopped at the entrance gap, the old woman considerably resented the presence of a maker of children's toys, whose gaily-painted van had been drawn to precisely the same position she had always preferred. The owner, a stranger to her, was sitting on the grass between the shafts, carefully whittling the leg of a wooden horse, which when completed, was to bear a marked resemblance to a tiny barrel supported by four chips. He was old and lean and round-shouldered, with a gentle, clean-shaven face and crisp, silver hair.

He touched his right temple in token of salutation to the new-comer; but she was too disturbed to acknowledge his courtesy save with an angry frown. He whistled softly and resumed his work; but seeing that she stood stock-still at the wall, whilst her horses began to graze on the further side of the road, he rose and went towards her, carrying the uncouth plaything under his arm.

"Is there owt I can do for yo', missus?"

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he said. "I reckon this spot is open to all?"

Miss Ansell's unreasonable vexation subsided when she saw that he was desirous of pleasing. "More years nor I can count," she replied, "ha' I been i' the way o' puttin' my house-van where yo've got yor'n. Yo' see, I've e'er chosen the time o' the year when nobody else weere like to be here, an' it has none happed afore as another'd gotten my place. I've falled into fixed ways, an' 'tis very tiresome to change. I'd take it as a favour if yo' could let me ha' my own corner."

The old man went to the door of his van and peeped in, but came back with a perplexed countenance. "I'm afeard as I canna, just now," he said. "If yo'll let me explain—"

She tugged jerkily at the bridle of the nearest horse, until it had drawn the living-van just inside the gap. Since he would not oblige, she meant to keep as far distant as was possible. Then she brought in the van that held her stock-in-trade, and unharnessing both horses, hobbled them to feed beside the brook, where the grass grew most generously.

The toy-maker watched her very ruefully; more than once he opened his mouth to speak; but her aspect was so forbidding that he shook his head in despair. Miss Ansell finally climbed the steps of her house-van, shut the door, and lighting her spirit-lamp, prepared

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tea. Then she sat in a spring-bottomed chair, especially designed for her own comfort, and unfolding a newspaper of the preceding day, she began to read and refresh herself after the tiring afternoon's journey. She was a great politician, a woman of strong natural loves and hatreds, and she cooed pleasantly, or groaned in derision, over certain speeches.

"When I weere young," she said, at last, "Parliament gen'lemen weere Parliament gen'lemen—good or bad. But Lord save me! whatten some o' 'em be now is more nor I can say!"

Meanwhile the toy-maker was walking slowly up towards Milton. A slender, dark lad, dressed in a loose Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, leaned heavily on his arm. His face was that of a student; the features sharply cut, the forehead abnormally large, the eyes dark and lustrous, and the mouth curiously sensitive. A delicate flush warmed his cheeks; his feet were uncertain in their movement. It was impossible not to see that he was convalescent after some severe illness.

"Ay," said the old man; "but I weerena goin' to rouse yo' out o' such a rare sleep. I've offended her, Tom, an' happen I'm a bit sorry; for hoo's gotten a kindly look, though her temper's hot as fire. Mind yo,' I amna against oomen wi' tempers—yor gran'mother had as powerful a one as could be found, an' yet I'm

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ready to sweer her the best creatur' God e'er made."

The lad laughed brightly. "Temper's a virtue, after all," he said. "My best masters are the worst-tempered. A stagnant pool is no use in the world save for the breeding of frogs and newts. No, my dear grandfather, you should have wakened me—'twould have done me no harm, for you know that I'm the laziest chap who ever lived."

"Ay, yo' be so," cried the gaffer. "A reg'lar idle ne'er-do-well!" He squeezed his grandson's arm fondly. "I'd knock ony man down who said such a thing," he added, "tho' I call mysen a loover o' pëace. 'Tweere nowt but ower-study at yor music as laid yo' up. . . . An' now yo've walked far enew. Lord! Lord! how my yeart sings now yor strength's a-coomin' back!"

They strolled along so slowly that when they reached their van the Dale was brilliant with the risen full moon. Miss Ansell had come out for a breath of fresh air; she sat on a quaint camp-stool near the brook, her fingers dexterously plaiting withes. The lad doffed his hat as he passed.

"I'm very sorry," he said, "but I was asleep when you came, and as I've been ill, my grandfather did not care to waken me. But to-morrow morning we'll move our van."

She did not look up; but shook her head coldly and muttered something incoherent;

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then they entered their home and ate supper. The windows were opened; but there was not sufficient breeze to flutter the muslin curtains. As the old man filled his pipe, the lad pressed the spring of a long black box, and lifted out an ancient, highly-polished violin.

"Perhaps the old lady will object," he said, mischievously feigning to replace it. "The sound may be distasteful to her."

"Then, domn it!" cried the gaffer, "hoo'll be th' first i' the world as e'er did owt but loove yor playin'!"

Tom slowly tuned the instrument; looking from the right-hand window his grandfather saw Mary Ansell evince considerable uneasiness at the strange sounds. As the lad began to play "Greensleeves," she bundled her canes together and rose, but suddenly plumped back on her stool, so carelessly that one of the straps almost broke asunder. . . . Soon her cloth-shod feet were beating time on the sun-burned grass.

He ceased abruptly, then struck into one of Glück's minuets. The dame was quite mystified; only occasionally could she catch the ghostly melody. Once more she thought of seeking the seclusion of her own van. The toy-maker laid a hand on his grandson's shoulder.

"Nay, no moore o' the things yo' play at the College," he pleaded; "owd daunce-toones to-night—the things as th' owd missus an' I

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can onderstand wi'out trouble—them as we knowed when we weere young as yo'. Canst rec'lect 'Bunch o' Blue Ribbons'?"

Tom nodded; in another minute the most rollicking of melodies leaped out to where Mary rested. Faster and sprightlier it grew with every note; until she found the sitting position intolerable, and rose once more, resolutely determined to resist the foolish fascination that was overcoming her. Then the tune changed to "Roger de Coverley," and her thoughts went back to the days of her youth, when she had danced with gay lads on many a polished threshing-floor. She sighed heavily, brushed the back of her hand over her eyes, and made her way towards the door. But as she paused midway, "Roger de Coverley" glided whimsically into the "Varsoviana," and a clear old voice sang well-known words:

"Oh, Mary, my dear, why don't yo' coome here?
Yo' think I don't loove yo'—what a foolish idear!"

The lover who died had teased her with the selfsame song. She tossed her head, and moved further; as she lifted her right foot to the first step, the "Varsoviana" gave place to the "Elfin Waltz." . . . She glanced furtively at the window of the toymaker's van; but seeing nobody there, began, in spite of a goodly share of common-sense, to whirl round and round. And as she span for the third

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time, she felt an arm encircle her waist, and fingers interlock with hers, and saw a merry old face smiling above her shoulder.

"'Tis my grandson's doin'," said the toy-maker, disconnectedly. "His mesters call him a genius; I do know that once he sets his mind on't, he can make fowk do just whatten he pleases. An' 't seems to me as he's chosen for us to dance to-night. I couldna bear to cross him, e'en if I wished, for he's been ill, an' 'tis the first time he's played for long enew. . . . But I scarce thought he'd move *yo' i' this fashion!*'

She blinked, but said nothing, and they danced together the queer old dip-waltz of their youth, fluttering over the moonlit grass, like two great fighting moths. Round and round and round again, faster and faster, giddier and giddier, until the old man stumbled and would have fallen had she not caught him by the coat tails.

"Yo've gotten a light foot," he stammered, as he wheeled to face her. "By Jowks! I thought 'twere a wench o' eighteen I held i' my arms—I thought as I weere a-jiggin' hobble-de-hoy!"

"Well," said Mary Ansell, wistfully; "if onybody'd said I should be such a fool, I'd ha' gi'en 'em the lee!"

The music had ceased, and the young musician, gleefully smiling, descended from the van.

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Mary lifted her hands in amazement. "Why!" she cried, "he's but a young lad! Nay, my deary, I'd like to thank yo'—is there owt I can do for the pleasure yo've trëated me wi'?" . . . He shook his head with a pretty pride. "Then I mun coome a-beggin'," she added. "Wilt let an owd ooman shake hands, so as hoo may remember, i' time to coome, as hoo's greeted a wonderful musicianer?"

Tom's laugh ended in something not unlike a sob; as their hands met he bent towards her and kissed her wrinkled cheek.

THE WAITRESS AT "THE CASTLE"

THE room at the "Castle Inn," devoted to functions of importance, lies to the left of the sanded lobby, from whose rough oaken ceiling-beams hang weird shrouded hams and gammons. The dining-parlour, as it is still called, is a great square place, lighted with a long window of heavy lattice. A century ago, the walls were covered with a curious paper, whose pattern displays immense panels of malachite framed with festoons of ruddy ribbon. This was glazed with a clear varnish, to-day still perfect enough—even where the plaster background is uneven—to cast strange reflections of the dancing firelight.

On the third Monday of the new year, good Mrs Bartle, the hostess, always prepared with state and assiduity a magnificent dinner for the Peakland tenantry of his Grace the Duke of Derbyshire. A huge sirloin (sent from the home-farm) was roasted in the cradle-spit; two haunches of venison were baked in coffins of heavy paste. As much beer as each farmer

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could drink, was served in pewter tankards, and the second course consisted of a massive plum-pudding flanked with dishes of mince pies, strongly flavoured with brandy.

On the last occasion the head waitress, a spinster hired for the evening, and gaily dressed and bedizened so that she might present a faint resemblance to one in the early prime of life, aroused the interest of all the more thoughtful of the duke's tenants. Mrs Bartle explained to her intimates that she had been compelled to employ an outsider—her own favourite handmaid having left to attend an ailing brother in the Woodlands.

Miss Fletcher, for that was the stranger's name, was dark-complexioned, with crisp black hair and vividly-coloured cheeks; her eyebrows were thickly pencilled; her long lashes rose from ebony ovals. She had white, sparkling teeth (too uniform to be natural), and lips of a hue that outvied the cherry. All the time that she served—her manner was exceedingly genial and homely—she wore a smile that never waned, and her voice was almost piteous in its deprecation to all to eat their fill.

Mr Bower-Barnby, the duke's steward, after the dinner made inquiries concerning the odd creature's identity, and Mrs Bartle began to regret that she had ventured to exhibit such a curiosity.

"My good lady," said the gentleman, wrought

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to a kindly humour by her excellent whisky and cigars; "I consider that you are acting very indiscreetly—very indiscreetly indeed, in permitting such a—ahem!—person to stay in your house. The poor creature has an air—distinctly—distinctly disreputable!"

"Lord! Lord!" cried Mrs Bartle, uplifting her palms, "if yo' weere to seek fro' end to end o' the Pëak country, yo' wouldna find anyone wi' a better character nor poor Jane. Ne'er a brëath has e'er blowed upon her! I be surprised at yo', Mester Bower-Barnby, that I be!"

Old Charles Bradwell, a bachelor farmer with the best stock in the valley, was vastly charmed by the lady's genial attentions. Being somewhat short-sighted, he was unaware that her physical charms were palpably aided by artifice; and more than once his knife stopped midway on its passage betwixt platter and lips, whilst he gazed upon the fitting figure with the beaming face.

"Hoo's pratty—pratty as flowers i' May," he murmured. "By Jowks! hoo's gotten a skin like a rose-lëaf! An' her voice—well, I ne'er did hear such a voice i' ony ooman afore."

He was notoriously shy; indeed, his neighbours were wont to declare that he would rather walk a mile than meet a woman; yet, strange to relate, to-night the trammels of his bashfulness were loosened, and he found himself wondering curiously whence she came,

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and whether or not she had a settled lover. Later, when prosy, incoherent speeches were being made, and the dining-parlour was full of tobacco smoke, he stole away from the table and hastened to the great kitchen, where he found the stranger drinking tea by the fire. An unoccupied chair stood near; he drew it quite close to her side.

"Tell yo' whatten, miss," he said, "it has been a pleasure to me to watch yo' a-doin' for us—I dunna rec'lect i' all my life seeing a young lady so handy. . . . Yo'll pardon me for speaking so frank?"

She nodded, still smiling. "No offence," she said. "When the beer's in, the wit's out."

"Nay," he protested. "I've had no more nor a quart since I came in."

Miss Fletcher saw with some compunction that he had flushed painfully. "I'm none used to flatt'ry," she said, "nat'rally it takes me a little aback."

Charles took heart-of-grace; he laid a hand on her sleeve and looked into her eyes. "Yo' needna tell me as a wench as bonny as yor-sen hasna oft been told things by men-fowk. If yo' did, miss, I shouldna b'lieve yo', so theree!'

She laughed in a strained fashion. "Happen I have, happen none," she said.

"Be yo' a native o' these parts?" he inquired. "I dunna think I've e'er seen yo' afore."

"My whōame's t'other side o' Bakewell,

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Monyash way," she said. "I live theere wi' my mother. An' if yo' havena seen me, why, I've oft enew seen yo' at the market. . . . Now yo' mun excuse me—I'm off to help wi' the dish-washin'."

But the old man did not loosen his grasp of her sleeve. "Wou'st mind tellin' me the name o' yor whöame," he said earnestly; "so as sometimes I might gie yo' a call?"

"Bless us!" she cried. "Whatten for should yo' coome to see such poor fowk as mother an' me? 'Tis true the spot's our own—theere's bu' twenty acres—but 'tis the very worst land i' the coountry. Sparrowbite Close is th' name."

"I'm glad yo've told me," said Bradwell, gravely. "Yo' may be sure as I'll take advantage o' yor kind invitation."

"Lawful case!" she exclaimed, jerking herself away, "I didna know as yo' weere invited. Well, mother'll be pleased to see yo'."

"'Cause hoo's about my age?" he demanded, waggishly.

"I reckon hoo's a bit owder," she replied. "Now, I mun go, an' I canna forbear sayin' as yor proper place is i' the dinner-parlour."

Late that night as she sat alone with Mrs Bartle by the tap-room fire, the hostess shook her head sadly and wiped her eyes with her handkerchief.

"Yo'll ne'er do for waitress-work, Jane," she said, in a feeble voice. "I've heerd shockin'

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things said about yo' to-night. First, Mester Bower-Barnby, he hinted as yo' weere no better nor yo' should be. . . . I'm sorry as I decked yo' out i' that fashion—I mun ha' overdone it; but God knows as I meant well."

Miss Fletcher laughed cheerily. "It has been a trëat, onyhow," she said. "I'm none sure as I blame fowk. Whene'er I caught sight o' mysen i' the glass, I felt like runnin' off an' dippin' my yead i' a bucket o' wayter! Nay, Hannah—bad as money is wanted at Sparrowbite, I'm afeard as I canna addle it wi' waitress-work."

"'Tisna as yo' dunna do the job to perfection," rejoined the hostess; "for yo're as 'tentive an' as capable as anyone could be."

"But 'tis 'cause I look such a Jezebel!" cried Miss Fletcher. "Eh dear, eh dear, 'tis a pity as we e'er mun grow owd. Men canna stand owd oomen a-tendin' o' 'em—an' when I've gotten mysen up i' this guise, a'most as if I weere goin' a-mummin'."

"Well, yo've gone too far," said the other. "Theere's no gainsayin' as yo' did an' do look pratty—but 'tis a wicked sort o' Prattiness. Heigho, lass, I'm worn out—let's go bedward."

Miss Fletcher slept very badly; more than once she wakened in tears, although she was as brave a creature as could be found in a twenty-mile march. She had hoped against hope that she might get regular employ-

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ment as a waitress, so that, with a year or two's wages she might save enough to pay off a little mortgage which her father had raised on Sparrowbite Close twenty years ago. There was none left of the family now save her mother and herself, and disease had just carried off two of the cows. . . . Still, in spite of her grief, she felt a not disagreeable excitement as she thought of the interest her odd appearance had aroused.

"Mester Bradwell touched me close," she murmured. "He's a goodly man, an' anyone as sees him can tell as he's kind an' clēan-lived. I could a'most wish as I weere young an' gaudy—so as he could fancy me i' ēarnest—'stead o' bein' forty-five, an' wi' a face lined wi' care. An' Hannah would ha' me paint an' blacken my hair. 'Tis right enew, I know, for men to want us young when we're helpin' 'em to vittles . . . but I'll ne'er coome out i' false colours again so long as I live. An' if Mester Bradwell does turn up, why, he'll see me just as I be. But I may be sure as he'll ne'er coome, none he!"

Nevertheless, one evening during the following week, when she was sitting with her mother discussing ways and means, a timorous knock sounded on the door, and poor Jane's heart beat very painfully.

"I'm sure 'tis Mester Bradwell, mother," she said. "I feel it just as if someone had told me. I'm a-goin' to hide mysen."

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She disappeared; the old woman rose herself and lifted the latch. A light rain was falling; the farmer's rough overcoat glistened with the drops. He shook her hand nervously.

"Bein' i' this part o' the world," he said, "I thought I'd like to call an' see Miss Fletcher. I heerd fro' Missus Bartle at 'The Castle' as hoo weere a-whöame wi' yo'."

The mother nodded politely. "Yo're very welcoome," she replied. "Now, prithee, sit yo' down. Jane ran off when hoo heerd yor knock—into the kitchen, I fancy; the wench is a bit shamed o' seein' yo'."

"Shamed?" he stammered.

"Ay," said Mrs Fletcher. "Yo' see, mester, 'tweerena her—'tweerena my dowter as hoo is i' real life. Hoo'd been coloured an' fuzzed up for the night, mainly 'cause hoo thought hoo could get a bit o' money by waitin', an' hoo's always frettin' about me ha'in' to cheese-pare."

The kitchen door opened, and the real Jane came out. This time there was a natural flush in her thin cheeks, and her eyes were very soft with tears.

"Dunna bother Mester Bradwell wi' our worries, Mother," she said, gently. "I'm glad to see yo', sir; for I've been very uncomfortable e'er since that night, an' I've wanted to explain to yo' as I'm nayther young nor pratty. Yo' weere good enew to

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say yo' admired me, an' I've felt right-down bad-principled e'er since."

The bachelor drew his spectacles from a waistcoat-pocket, and with trembling fingers placed them above his eyes.

"An' I've been very onëasy," he said, hesitatingly; "for yo' seemed so much younger nor me. But yor voice has been dingin' i' my ears by night an' by day."

He took her hand and led her into the halo of candlelight. "By Jowks!" he said, "yo're fifty times more to my fancy nor yo' weere then."

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AT Nether Braddon, a tiny hamlet on Milton Edge, two miles distant from the village, the Wakes is celebrated with a greater enthusiasm than elsewhere in the Peak country. For one week in late autumn, every house is packed with friends and kinsfolk—some from towns hundreds of miles away—and at night merry dancers shake the ancient floor of the upper storey of the big barn belonging to the little inn, which bears above its only doorway the sign of “The Marquis of Granby.”

This “dauncin’ chamber,” a place originally intended for the storage of fodder, is both quaint and inconvenient. To reach it one must pass through the shippon, where Frank Barker the host’s meagre cows are stalled; then climb a creaking ladder with broad rungs, and pass through a trap-door in the low ceiling. A lad is always stationed here to give all who come a well-meaning hoist, and to prevent the dancers from falling down. This year it fell about that Bill Mather, a fellow of weak intellect, occupied the post. He is twenty-five years old, undersized, with

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a long chestnut beard fancifully plaited in three tails. In matters of attire he displays the spirit of a coxcomb; his favourite costume consists of a dark-blue corduroy coat and waistcoat (made long ago for his father, who had been gamekeeper in Squire Furness's employ), and a worn pair of grey tweed knickerbockers, presented by the last curate, shortly before his elopement with Cowper the carrier's pretty wife. His stockings are of faded green wool, very carefully darned—for Bill is handy with the needle—and his evening shoes, or rather slippers, are made of woven listing, scarlet, white and blue.

When old Mrs Partridge heard that he was to play doorkeeper during the busy week, she bethought herself of a curious plan by which she might gain peace for her latter end. She had settled seven daughters in comfortable wedlock, and she regarded it as an offence against Heaven that Maria, her youngest-born, showed no disposition to clinch matters with the timorous bachelor who had sat with her and walked out with her for upwards of ten years.

Maria had inherited little of either the old woman's vivacity or wit. She was a prim creature, on the verge of thirty, pale and shrewish of feature; but quiet and placable as a cade-lamb. In spite of her mother's deprecations—it being possible for her husband to take up his abode at Brosterfields Farm, and

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occupy himself upon the land—she could not make up her mind to practise any arts that might bring Thomas Turner to the point.

“If I weere to do as yo’ bid me, Mother,” she would say, “I’ld ne’er lift up my yead again. Tom an’ me mun go on as we are doin’—there’s no knowin’ whatten a day’ll bring forth.”

“There isna,” was the old woman’s reply; “but I will say as yo’re gettin’ grizzleder an’ grizzleder every week, an’ I can a’most see yor wrinkles a-creepin’! Take my word on’t as Tom’ll wake up soome morn wi’ his fancy set on a younger wench, an’ then he’ll gi’e yo’ the lurch. I know men-fowk, I do. He’s one o’ the meek sort—butter wunna melt i’ his mouth—an’ ’tis the meek as always plays the drattiest tricks!”

Then poor Maria would lift her apron and wipe away some foolish tears, and Mrs Part-ridge, who was a bed-lier with rheumatism, would cluck like an angry hen.

“’Tisna as I want to get rid o’ yo,” she said; “for yo’ll ha’ to go on tendin’ me just the same; but I reckon it ondecient none ha’in’ a man i’ the house! Tom could set his land easy enew, an’ mine’ld be all the better for him workin’ on’t. Eh dear, it makes my yeart bleed when I see the shirts he weers—ne’er a button on ’em—all tied wi’ bits o’ string. . . . I soometimes do b’lieve as yo’ havena a ooman’s feelins at all!”

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But as neither entreaties nor threats moved Maria in her determination, the dame resolved to take the matter entirely in her own hands. So on the market day before the Wakes, when Maria had gone to town with her butter and eggs, she sent the farm lad up to the cottage on the moor-edge where Mrs Mather lived, with word for Bill to come down during the afternoon and spell out a chapter of "Fatherless Fanny"—a romance to which she had been devoted ever since her childhood. Before he arrived, she crept from her bed, and hobbled painfully to an oaken desk, whence she took a bag of the huge mottled sweetmeats which are known in that country as "bull's eyes."

Not much reading, however, was done; the serving-woman in the kitchen listened in vain for the buzzing drone of Bill's voice. For the hour he stayed there, she heard her mistress talking very impressively, and the man responding with high-pitched giggles. She caught their parting words as Bill opened the door of the parlour where the invalid lay.

"Now, I'll trust yo', lad, to keep it quiet; an', mind yo', yo'll get as mony more as'll last yo' for a month . . . strong uns, too. . . ."

"No imagination, no imagination," Bill cackled proudly. "No imagination!"

As he left the house, she noted that his cheeks were greatly swollen, and that his breath was laden with the aroma of peppermint. When she took in Mrs Partridge's

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tea, the old woman was still shaking with laughter.

"Well!" she cried, "yon poor lad's gotten more sense nor soome o' us think. Theree's a good many parsons as arena ony wiser. Now, Libby—happen—happen yo'd best none mention to my dowter as he's been to-day. None as it matters owt—theere's no partic'lar rëason."

Wednesday night is the most popular time of the Wakes. It is regarded as a point of honour for every hale person who lives on Milton Edge to be present for "the good o' th' house." This year Maria was slightly averse from going; she had already been present half-a-score times with Tom for escort; but as the time drew nigh, the wise mother sternly overruled her objections.

"Yo've gotten to be theere for the credit o' our fam'ly," she said, "an' if yo' say ony more, I'll just get out o' bed, an' crawl to th' 'Markis o' Granby' as well as I can. Tom'll be here i' an hour, an' I make no doubt as he'll gi'e me his arm."

Maria made no reply; but went to her chamber and donned her snuff-coloured Sunday gown, and her black bonnet with the white roses, so that when the swain reached the house she was quite ready to start. They walked leisurely up the rough road, as far apart as possible—according to their wont; when they reached the hill-top, she fell behind

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and gazed curiously at her lover's back. He was a year younger than she; yet she noted that his shoulders were bowed, and that a bald spot showed beyond the rim of his rusty felt hat.

"Dear Lord!" she exclaimed, with a greater irritation than she had ever displayed in his presence. "Dear Lord! yo're beginning to look like a gran'feyther!"

He turned slowly, a mild wonder in his pale blue eyes.

"That is so, loove," he replied. "Yo' an' me gets owder every day."

Then they walked on again; Maria said no more; but her sharp chin quivered, and one or two tears dried on her cheeks. At the fore-court of the inn they met a cluster of acquaintances, and after passing compliments, made their way to the bar-parlour, where Tom drank a pint of home-brewed, and Maria very genteelly sipped a glass of sherry wine.

The music had already begun in the "dauncin' chamber"—the music of a concertina and a fiddle, struggling valorously in a waltz which Maria remembered as having been played on that remote occasion when Tom had been her partner for the first time. She set down the glass and wiped her lips.

"If we've gotten to go we may as well go now," she said, dully. "I'd as lief none; but Moother 'ld ne'er be content."

He stared stupidly. "Whey, M'ria," he

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stammered, "I canna tell whatten's coome ower yo'! Yo' used for to be that glad at the thought o' dauncin'——"

"Ay, I used for to be, Tom," she interrupted; "but I'm getting 'owd, as yo' say, an' I havena the sperrit as I had. Coome along, or all th' seats'll be tuk."

So they went through the shippin and up the ancient step-ladder. As Bill Mather jerked Maria through the trap, his head fell back, and he began to laugh very boisterously—the noise growing so loud that soon the dancers fell apart and the musicians ceased to play.

"Lawk-a-mercy!" he cried, as soon as he recovered his breath. "Here's Mester Thomas Turner an' Miss M'ria Patridge—a couple as owt to ha' been wed years an' years ago, but for both o' em bein' so timid——"

Maria laid a hand on his arm. "Hold yor tongue, Bill," she said hoarsely. "Yo've no right to say such things!"

But Bill thrust her gently aside, so that she stumbled against Tom, who stood so near to a tin sconce that held a tallow candle that his coat was all bespattered with grease.

"I've gotten no imagination," continued Bill, "so yo' may know as 'tis gospel truth. . . . There's times when he takes her on his knee, just as if hoo weere a pratty young lass—hee-hee!"

"'Tis a domned lee!" faltered Tom. "I ne'er did such a thing i' my life."

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Mrs Mather, a wizened widow with a Derbyshire neck, thereupon angrily declared that whatever defects her son had, deceitfulness was not amongst them. She had never heard him say anything in all his life that was not true.

"An' he busses her—lawfu' case! how he does bu' buss her at the garden gate! 'Gi'e us anooother,' says he, an' 'Ay,' says hoo. 'Tis like a story i' print; bu' yo' may bet yor life on't as they'll ne'er get wed!"

He paused and looked blankly at his audience. Nobody was laughing; the sight of the lovers' distress being over-painful.

"'Tis true," he stuttered; "for yo' all know as I've gotten no imagination—no imagination—no imagination!"

Maria disappeared very quickly through the trap; Tom followed, overtaking her as she passed through the gateway of the inn-yard. They did not speak until they came in sight of Brosterfields; when Tom, seeing that her face was distorted with silent weeping, touched her lightly on the sleeve.

"I'm sorry as the lunny made such fools o' us, M'ria," he said, in a broken voice; "but I know as I deserved it. We mun wed as soon as e'er we can, to stop fowks' mouths."

"Ay," said Maria. "'Tis the only thing as we can do. Onyway, Moother'll be set at rest."

He came closer, and put his arm around her

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neck. "M'ria," he said, "yo' mun forgi'e me for hangin' on; but I've no pluck."

She murmured something soft and unintelligible. "M'ria," he said, "*will* yo' let me gi'e you a kiss?"

Her lips were close to his ear. "I've nowt again it," she whispered.

LAVINIA'S LAST TESTAMENT

WHEN Lavinia Spurr died of a sudden heart seizure, which came on a wash-day when she was alone at Goatcliff Nook, it must be confessed that Sarah Maltby felt a grief almost as great as the husband's, for the two women had been bosom-friends since early childhood. Sarah's trouble, moreover, was tinged with the dread of a disagreeable duty to be performed—the fulfilment of a promise exacted on many occasions when the wife and the spinster sat with uplifted skirts warming their knees before the latter's fire.

"'Tis a happy thowt to me, loove," said Lavinia, on the very last evening, "as when I be gone yo'll tend Melchisidec. I do b'lieve as I should coome back if I thought as he weere livin' löane an' neglected."

"Yo' do talk," interrupted Sarah,—“yo'll outlast me.”

"I shanna, wench," replied Lavinia, very solemnly. "My own mother deed at sixty-five—bein' took like to a flash o' lightnin', an' I've always knowed as I shall go the same. Oh, Sarah, when my time does coome, yo'll see as

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everything's done i' order—theere's a night-gown i' the bottom drawer i' my chamber, an' a knitted cap, an' a pair o' cotton socks as has ne'er been worn. Yo'll bear i' mind as 'tis usual i' my fam'ly to put a Bible onder the yëad, an' a dish o' salt here?"

She laid a hand upon her chest, and sighed very heavily. Sarah passed the back of her hand over her eyes to wipe away two real tears.

"Yo're low to-day, Livvy, that's whatten yo' are," she said, brokenly. "Why, yo've gotten a nice fresh colour i' yor cheeks——"

"—The beef mun be well-röasted, Sarah: at Furness's buryin'—the last as yo' an' me went to—'tweere like to red-currant jelly. I couldna fancy it—if yo' rec'lect, I ate nowt but cake."

She returned soon to Goatcliff, leaving the old maid filled with sombre and depressing thoughts. Never before, although she had often compelled her friend to promise to tend Melchisidec's declining years, had Mrs Spurr displayed such ominous forebodings. Sarah slept very uneasily that night; more than once she rose under the impression that the ivy tapping against her window was the sound of someone urgently knocking at her door. After dawn she dressed herself, and when she had milked the three kine, and fed the poultry of her little farm, she climbed several walls and went to the summit of a knoll, whence she could see the front of the Spurrs' house

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which lay behind a slight ridge of the moor. To her great relief, the clothes lines were stretched across the forecourt, and a pair of sheets fluttered bravely in the fresh western wind.

Two hours later, as she stood at the bake-stone in her little offshoot kitchen, busily engaged in the manufacture of the week's oat-cakes, her heart gave a great bound, then almost stopped, for she heard the sound of stumbling footsteps on the flagged garden path, and looking through the open doorway saw Melchisidec, very pale and ghastly, coming to her house.

"Coomer up to Goatcliff, at once," he gasped. "Livvy's tuk—I found her a-liggin' on the steps. . . . An' the house full o' smöake—clöathes burned i' the set-pot!"

Then he turned and ran back home. When Sarah entered, she found Lavinia lying on the red-chintz-covered settle, with the old man kneeling at her side and striving to force brandy between her closed teeth. A plump little hand, sodden with the washing, strove automatically to brush him away, and this was the only sign of life the poor soul ever gave, although after they had carried her upstairs and laid her in the four-post bed, she lingered for a full week.

Sarah fulfilled her old friend's injunctions to the letter, and the funeral was a notable success, although Melchisidec was unable to

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partake of the well-cooked tea when the mourners returned from Milton church. He shook his head soon after he sat to the table; then rose, and with averted face left the parlour.

"Yo' mun excuse me none sittin' wi' yo', friends," he said, in a choked voice; "but it seems all so strange, us feedin' as if nowt weere the matter, an' my poor Livvy laid i' the graveyard. I wunna be a spoil-fëast, none I; yo' mun all enjoy yorsens wi'out me."

Then he went upstairs to the chamber where she had lain, and sat beside the bed, his face hidden between arms out-thrust on the linen-covered mattress. There Sarah found him when she could spare a minute from her duties as mistress of the ceremonies. She laid a thin hand gently on his shoulder.

"I've coome up to say as yo're none the only one as frets for Livvy," she said. "It fair goes to my yeart as hoo isna here to share this do, poor wench. But happen hoo isna far off—happen hoo sees all."

He began to weep so painfully that Sarah was compelled to bite her own lips, lest she should lose her own self-command.

"'Tweere a pëaceful end, Melchisidec," she said. "I dunna b'lieve as hoo suffered ony pain. Eh, hoo weere a good creature—God ne'er made a better since the world began!"

Melchisidec lifted a blubbered face. "I

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dunna know whatten I mun do," he sobbed. "Hoo tended me just as if I'd been a babby!"

Sarah laid her candle on the dressing-chest. "Hoo always said to me as yo' mun get another wife," she murmured, hesitatingly; "tho' tisna a time to talk o' such matters."

The old man lifted a corner of the sheet, and mopped his eyes. "An' wheere can I get one like to her?" he cried. "Wheere can I get one as knew so much as hoo did? Livvies dunna grow on blagberry bushes!"

Nevertheless, he was much consoled, and soon—before the meal was half-finished—resumed his place at table, with a countenance almost cheerful, despite a melancholy foreboding of his loneliness when all the guests were gone. Sarah noted, with some consternation, that he looked very earnestly more than once upon Mrs Badger, a stout widow from Grassbrook, who was near akin to the dead woman. He poured rum into her teacup until she playfully covered the top with her palm.

"Yo' munna gie me so much, Mester Spurr," she said, chidingly, "or yo'll tak' away my character. 'Tis good an' strengthenin,' tho'—well, just a drop, but no more!"

Sarah's dismay increased during the evening, when she heard him speak, in an undertone, of the division of Lavinia's apparel, and Mrs Badger made pointed inquiries concerning a jet-trimmed dolman which had

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been purchased with an unexpected legacy. Lavinia had often made the spinster don it, and had even suggested the necessary alterations for the frail little figure. It was with considerable relief that she hailed the departure of the company, and prepared, before returning to her own home, to settle Melchisidec comfortably for the night.

As she carefully raked the cinders over the grate on the hearth, so that the ash might fall into the "purgatory" below, Melchisidec thanked her cordially for the trouble she had taken.

"But 'twill none be for long," he said. "Yo'll ne'er regret it, Sarah—yo'll ne'er wish yo' hadna doone it. I shanna trouble yo' long."

Sarah lifted her head and saw him gazing with a bland smile at the ceiling.

"Dear Lord!" she exclaimed, "yo' arena goin' to follow Livvy——"

"I dunna mēan that," he hastened to explain. "Yo' know whatten yo' said about me gettin' a second—as 'twere the poor wench's desire? I feel as if 'twould be a sin if I disobeyed her. . . ."

She waited for an explanation that never came; in a few minutes she lighted her lantern, and after a feeble good-night, prolonged half in expectancy that he would be gallant enough to proffer to accompany her, she made her way through the dark lanes to her own house.

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"Well!" she said, after she had crept into bed, where she lay very primly, with scarce a crease in the counterpane. "Well! I do b'lieve as that Mary Badger is a-settin' her cap at him already! Oh dear, oh dear, whatten mun I do, when I promised Livvy time an' time again? An' 'tis quite out o' the question me askin' him—no ooman wi' ony decency about her e'er asks a man. An' I dunna want him. Lord knows, I'd far liefer be as I am!"

On the morrow, when she was preparing the butter for the huckster, Melchisidec called at her house. He was very pale and dishevelled, and his breath smelt strongly of whisky.

"I've been scared o' stayin' all alöane," he said. "I daredna go bedward, an' I sat up all night aside the fire. . . . I do b'lieve as I've tuk a sup too much; but I couldna help mysen. I would thou'dst go up an' set things straight again, Sarah—I'm none handy wi' owt. Eh, poor Livvy! poor Livvy!—thou mightest ha' stayed so as I could go first!"

"Happen hoo would if hoo could ha' done," said Sarah, whose temper was not as good as usual; "but 'tweere none i' her hands. Ay, I'll go when the huckster's been. Art off to Milton?"

"I thought as I'd step down to Grassbrook, an' see Missus Badger. Hoo weere vastly coomfortin' last night. . . . Thank yo' very

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kindly, Sarah—Livvy'd thank yo' too, if hoo could."

Sarah went up to the house, and put everything in order. A curious impulse made her take out Lavinia's dolman, and try it on before the small mirror.

"Ten inches takin' in ower the bosom," she said, "an' I'm afeard theere's mildew on the sleeves. Onywise, Mary Badger shanna get it."

Her gaze fell on a shell church in the middle of the mantel-shelf; she opened this and found that it contained some ancient pink note-paper with scalloped edges.

"If I mun carry out her wishes, I mun," she muttered, "tho' it doesna seem an upright thing to do. But I'm none agoin' to ask him mysen, so that's flat!"

Later in the day, Melchisidec came again, trembling with excitement, to her house. He carried a neatly folded paper in his hand.

"I've found Livvy's will," he said, "writ only a week afore hoo deed. I just happed to be lookin' amongst her things, wi' Mrs Badger i' my mind, when this slipped out!"

Sarah took the paper, and turning her back to him went to the window and read: "This is my last testament, as I do beg of Melchisidec and dear Sarah Maltby to wed after I be gone, since there's nobody as will make him a better wife. Her to have my clothes. Your Loving Wife, Lavinia Spurr."

LAVINIA'S LAST TESTAMENT

"Hoo weere set on't, appariently," said the widower, dubiously; "an' I'd begun to fancy as Mis—as I mun tak' another ooman. An' now theere's nowt for't but for yo' to agree."

"I reckon theere isna," said Sarah, querulously; "but yo' may be sure as I didna want yo'. I ne'er thought I'd ha' to wed a widow man."

THE PAINTED CABINET

IF you go to the Callow Valley, entering by the narrow ravine near the summit of the Sir William hill, you can see the old Gotherage corn-mill, resting beside the marshy bed of a half-drained dam. The little octagonal mill-house is used now for the storage of bracken bedding, and the long lofty chamber where, forty years ago, the stones groaned in their beds, is quite roofless, its walls blackened with fire and overgrown with rank weeds. Through the open doorway you can distinguish, beneath the débris of plaster, and of grey slates riven by heat, curious mounds of charred wood and pieces of metal.

It was Sarah Gotherage who told me the story, one day after she had chidden me severely for climbing over her walls, and then relented and asked me to sit and rest in the house-place of her little farm, whilst a mid-summer storm passed over the moors. A sudden wind whipped the pools of the ruined mill-dam, until the spray rose as high as the tops of the alders on the banks, then hail-stones fell in thick sheets. The hot earth

THE PAINTED CABINET

seethed and steamed; from Sarah's window it seemed as if a great fire with invisible flames were burning over the remains of the corn-mill.

"Dall it!" said the old woman, as she stood on tiptoe at my side. "It put's me i' mind o' brother Yeb, an' o' whatten brought about his deäth!"

The hail ceased quickly; the sun shone again, brighter than ever, upon the long wet grass of the ravine. Sarah had drawn to the hearth a tall, old-fashioned churn, made of white oak, with copper bands that glittered like gold. I noted with some amazement that before taking the dasher between her palms, she made the sign of the cross, and muttered: "Marry coome up!"

"'Tis an owd custom," she explained. "Parson, he says as Gotherages, when all the township belonged to 'em, weere Popish. He'ld ha' me gi'e it up; but the butter ne'er coomes so well. I tried once wi'out, an' kirned for three hour wi'out bringin' it. An' when it did coome, why, it tasted strong o' onyons! An' that's thirty year ago—'twas the first kirnin' day after the mill weere burned, an' my mind weere bothered."

The dasher passed less easily through the cream; Sarah's forehead glistened with perspiration, which ever and anon she wiped off with a corner of her apron. And whilst she washed the mass of butter time after time

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in clear spring water, and salted it, and modelled it deftly into pats, she eased her mind of painful memories. The sunshine that had followed the storm lasted but for a short space, and a soft rain fell continuously.

“Yo’ see,” she said, “my brother Yeb weere born when poor mother’s yëad weere addled, an’ I bein’ the elder weere stronger nor him i’ moore ways nor one, an’ when mother deed I had to tend him i’ her place. A pratty lad he weere—wi’ a thin face, an’ sharp eyen, an’ hair red as gowd—to look at him yo’ld ha’ sworn as he weere sharp-witted as ony. The Lord had willed it otherwise, howe’er, an’ poor Yeb had his failin’s. An’ the worst weere as he weere ne’er content save when he weere hutchin’ up owd rubbish. E’en when he wore petticoats he’ld gether rusty tins an’ bruken pots an’ owd besom-stales, an’ hide ’em away i’ an empty pig-cote. Mony’s the time I’ve cried to see feyther tannin’ his little back wi’ an öaken staff till ’tweere piteous to look upon. But strive as we would, Yeb’ld ne’er change his ways, nay, none to the very end.

“When feyther weere called—the mill hadna been used for years—he passed away wi’out a will, an’ all went to Yeb, bein’ freehold, as the law bids it—the lad grew worse an’ worse. He’d gotten a fancy o’ makin’ the baulks—that weere the top floor o’ th’ mill-room—into a reg’lar musyeum, an’ every penny as came

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fro' the land went i' buyin' up bits o' öak an' cracked pottery fro' every house on the coountry-side. An' 'tweere me as had to work the land, for he ne'er did a ströake; but sat among his idols like an owl i' a holly bush—fingerin' 'em an' dustin' 'em an' rubbin' the oak wi' wax an' turps ontill yo' could see yor face i' it.

“An' so it went on for ten year—me drudgin' to mak' both ends meet, an' to find him a bit for his hobby, though God knows livin' weere plain enew. Th' lad'ld wëar sackin' rayther nor forgo ony piece o' lumber as he'd set his yeart on, an' I weerena one to stand i' his way; for tho' he naungered me sometimes ontill I weere well-nigh distrowt, he weere the only kin I had, an' he'd a wheedlin' way wi' him—rubbin' his yead again mine, an' mumblin' like a new-kindled tabby when he wanted owt.

“Well, it might ha' gone on till now, if't hadna been for a ooman—ten year owder nor me, who lived Grassbrook way, an' had a grand cabinet, carved wi' scriptural scenes, an' painted like a picture. It had been i' her fam'ly for three hunnerd year, hoo said, an' a gen'leman had told her as 'tweere worth at læast a hunnerd pound—bein' Eyetalian work. An' Yeb, who'd been to a sale nigh wheere hoo lived, had seen it as he passed her door. . . . The long an' the short o' 'tweere, as my brother, who'd shown no sign o' bein'

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ooman-fond afore, went coortin' o' her, for the sake o' the cabinet.

"I used for to hear him sighin' i' his bed at night, an' soometimes he'd screet out wi' the nightmare. The ooman, poor soul, weere very foul—a reg'lar judy wi' a fat, white face, an' curls grey as a badger. Hoo'd only lived at Grassbrook three year—fowk said as hoo came fro' Staffordshire. Yeb, he thought hoo weere a widow, an' so did everybody else; but the end proved as hoo weereena.

"A bit o' money hoo had—happen ten shillin' a week—an' hoo reckoned hersen among the better end o' fowk. I will say as hoo weere genteel an' civil-spoken enew; in fact, as far as hoo went, I've nowt again her, save one thing, an' 'tweere that one thing as wrought all the mischief. Yo' see, hoo weere a wedded ooman a'rëady when hoo went to church wi' Yeb, an' 'tweere a grëat sin. . . . But, as turned out afterwards, her man had been i' Stafford County 'Sylum for moore nor twenty year, tho' hoo'd lived respectable. An' Yeb weere takin' i' his looks, tho' my own brother—he'd a face as blithe as a babby's, but for the crinkles. An' so 'tweere as the ooman came wi' her painted cabinet, after spurrin's an' all weere ower.

"The piece o' furnityure weere far too high to stand i' the parlour, wheere the ceiling weere scarce man-height; so, tho' there weere talk o' brëakin' a hole thro' the playster-

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work, for the time 'tweere necessary to set it on the baulks amongst t'other lumber. An' theere Yeb usëd for to go, day after day, an' sit afront it till his eyen weere fair dazed i' his yëad. Th' ooman an' me got on well—better nor most oomen would, for hoo weere a pëaceful soul, an' hoo did whatten hoo weere towd to do wi'out grum'lin'! I spoke o' movin' here on the weddin' day—this place weere a rabbit-warren then—but hoo begged an' prayed me none to lëave her. A bit scared o' house-woork hoo weere, maybe; but a kind-yearted ooman, wi'out doubt. We'd ne'er a word across.

“Yeb's wedded life lasted little ower six months; 'tweere i' the har'st-time when the end came. We'd gotten the last load o' whöats (me an' the farm lads, for Yeb did nowt), and that same night we all supped i' the barn, i' the fashion feyther always held to. An' as we sat together at the table, a man came in wi' a rusty sickle i' his right hand. . . . God ha' mercy, he weere th' awfulest-lookin' fellow my eyen e'er dropped on—his canister weere like to a baboon's, an his eyen weere red as hot cokes!

“Lizbeth, that weere the ooman's name, gave a grëat screet an' ducked onder the table. Hoo weere quicker at that time nor I e'er saw her before or after. Th' man he glared at us all, an' then ran off, an' we saw him no moore. No merry-makin' after that. It tuk three lads

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an' me to drag the ooman out an' into the house, an' ere we put her to bed, hoo had 'sterics an' a fit o' peplexes.

"Yo' mun know as Yeb weere used to go every night ere bedtime to the baulks wi' a lantern, just for to see as all his treasures weere safe ontill early morn. He weerena much troubled about Lizbeth's state, that I will say, an' he went then as usual. But the poor lad ne'er came back o' hissen!"

Here Sarah Gotherage lifted her apron again, this time to wipe the tears from her cheeks.

"Yo' see, mester, his brains went, they did. He couldna speak when we found him a-sittin' on the dam-bank like to a figure o' stöane. The lunny had set fire to the baulks i' three places, an' 'twere burnin' like a box o' matches—painted cabinet an' all. Happen the wax an' the turps Yeb had used made it worse—ony-how, in less nor hawf-an-hour the roof crashed down, an' our own house caught fire, an' thereere weere soome ado to save the furniture. An' Yeb, he ne'er spoke again; but sat an' sat an' giggled day in, day out. Lizbeth's man, for 'twere him, got out o' the 'Sylum, an' bent on findin' her, weere caught next morn an' ta'en back. Yeb weere hard-like on her, for hoo nursed him well an' hoo tried to bring back whatten senses he'd gotten by nayture; but he used for to look at her as if hoo weere muck.

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“Ay, mester, Yeb deed, he did, a week after, i’ a kind o’ ströake. Lizbeth, poor soul, bided we me ten year ontill the dropsy tuk her. We ne’er brangled about owt. Hoo left me whatten money hoo’d gotten. Happen ’tweere as well Yeb did dee; for if he’d ere coome across another ooman wi’ a painted cabinet, there’s no knowing whatten he might ha’ doone.”

A SALE IN PEAKLAND

THREE days after Nathan Shift's funeral, the Peakland village was placarded with announcements of the sale at Camsdale on the following Monday. One cow, four heifers, two sows, an aged pony, and twenty couples of fowls comprised the farm-stock; the household furniture, from the list given, was apparently very scant; the principal items being a "long-sleeved" clock, a corner cupboard, a writing-desk with drawers underneath, and six rush-bottomed chairs.

At a quarter before one o'clock on the appointed afternoon, a fat little spinster with silver hair went down from Milton to the house by the mill. She was neatly dressed in black, with a heavy wool shawl and an antiquated bonnet. Her skin was very fair, but blemished with red patches due to the hard water of the hill-top. She carried a curious parasol with a hinged stick, and a large reticule of gaily-coloured needlework.

As yet few people were on their way to the sale, for the auctioneer from the market-town was notoriously unpunctual. Now and then a

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shabby broker's cart rattled past over the loose stones; sitting on the brambly banks she perceived solitary men of unkempt aspect, who meant to lounge about the farmyard and earn a few pence by carrying home the purchases of the respectable.

One or two villagers were sauntering to and fro afront the gabled house, commenting humorously on the display of pottery and rusty tools arranged in lots. They greeted the woman with surprise; one well-to-do farmer, of an age equal to her own, would not cease wagging her hand.

"By'r Leddy, Miss Damm," he cried, "yo've forgi'en the owd chap at last!"

"I forgave him years an' years gone by," she replied faintly. "An' I'd ha' gone to look to him at the end, if't hadna been as he weere took so sudden-like. Poor Nathan! poor lad! Well, 'tis whatten we mun all coome to—rich an' poor alike!"

"Ay, it be so," said the gaffer, whose mirth was somewhat quenched by the sadness of her tone. "'The grave's the market-place wheere all men meet.'"

"That's God's truth," she responded. "I've heerd as he's willed to have a grand stöane verse. It runs:—

"The proud can have no more nor this,
The wise, the rich, the brave—
A mowdrin' stöane, an e-pitaph,
A green sod an' a grave."

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As she recited her voice grew querulous, and the water came to her eyes. She turned away abruptly, and passed through the low doorway to the house-place. Two women, distant relatives and co-heiresses of Nathan, sat on milking stools before the fire. They came from a distant village, and knew none of the villagers. Each had a flask in her skirt pocket, from which she sipped furtively. Six pairs of newly-blackened boots, abnormally large, were ranged on the window sill. Above the mantel hung a quaint, cottage-shaped barometer, in whose open porch stood a cardboard man, with his wife in the background. The tall clock in the corner was of curious make; above its dial one might read the date and the waxing and waning of the moon. This, according to a scrawled envelope transfixed by the key, was *not for sale*.

Miss Damm curtsied to the women and made her way up the stone staircase to the bachelor's bedroom, where there was no furniture save a four-poster with a coved top. On the chequered blue-and-white mattress she could distinguish the sharp outlines of the coffin that had lain there. The other chambers, all opening from this, contained nought but cobwebs and worn-out clothing and broken agricultural implements. The light everywhere was dim and greenish, the windows being heavily framed with rank ivy. The desolate untidiness of the place aroused an impatient

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anger; she retreated suddenly to the open air.

The auctioneer arrived in a low phaeton, drawn by a bay pony; a buzz of greeting rose from the waiting folk. Already a fairly large crowd had assembled. Nichols—that was the man's name—was middle-aged and red-haired, very Jewish of profile, with prominent ill-made teeth. He moved towards the forecourt to which the house opened, casting supercilious glances on the poorer class of brokers. His clerk followed, carrying a small packing-case, which he inverted near the low wall, and the auctioneer, mounting his makeshift platform, opened the sale.

"The weather's threatening," he began, "and since there's a lot of ladies here with fashionable bonnets, it will be best for me to put up the household goods first. You see, Nathan Shift was an old bachelor, and there's always considerable sympathy about an old bachelor's belongings. He had no wife to look after him, poor soul, and he stored up things he need not have stored."

His allusions to Nathan's solitary existence touched the right key: peals of merry laughter rose from his hearers. Not one face was unmoved save that of Miss Damm, who stood, stark and unsympathetic, in the open doorway, watching the different lots of odd tea-cups, saucers, and metal jugs pass to their purchasers. She could not suppress a feeling

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of vexation at the sight; in some odd way she felt that she had a juster right to Nathan's goods than had his own kinsfolk.

One of the women came out with a pair of unused homespun sheets. "These," said the auctioneer, "were spun for the wedding that never came off. I've heard quite a romantic story about Nathan. Why, he was going to be married, and a week before the day he quarrelled with his sweetheart and slapped her face! She was a proud lass, and she broke off her engagement, and made a vow never to speak to him again. A bit hard, for he was only a lad of twenty at the time."

He was unaware that the heroine of this tragi-comedy stood within arm's length. Possibly he thought that she had predeceased the bachelor. Miss Damm gave a little inward murmur, then piped out a bid for the bridal sheets, and they fell to her for twelve shillings. She folded them deliberately into the smallest compass; then, opening the clasp of her reticule, laid them in its depths. The other women appeared now with a bundle of bandanna handkerchiefs; Miss Damm recognised them as her own gifts to Nathan. They had never been used, and the colours were still fresh. Not bidding herself, she experienced some slight pleasure in the fact that they sold well, realising a figure little less than they had cost. After that came blankets and old carpets, and finally the two women brought

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a large bag of unbleached cotton, and before untying its strings spoke some few words in an undertone to Nichols.

He nodded, and slowly unfolded a marvellous counterpane of rich silk patchwork. A few moths fluttered unseen over the interested crowd as the breeze spread it to its full length.

"This quilt," he said, "was made by Nathan's aunt for a wedding-gift. She had good taste, as you see; old ladies don't work such things nowadays. Her husband was a gamekeeper under the Duke, and she had been lady's-maid to the Duchess. Some of these silks were worn at Court balls!"

Miss Damm opened her mouth to make an offer, but Mrs Fearnehough, of "The Bold Cloudesley," cried out an extravagant sum. The spinster's hand fumbled despairingly in her pocket, and found the purchase quite out of the question. She remembered the delight she had felt at her first examination of this magnificent needlework. The sight of the ravages wrought by moths in the nearest corner brought some gratification; she averted her face and smiled to the blank wall. The women-folk with husbands to work for them were eager for the purchase; finally the masterpiece was sold for two guineas to a young wife, who wept when she discovered its condition. Next, a wall-paper-covered trunk was brought to light and its lid raised. At the top, swathed in dusty muslin, lay a beaver

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hat, very flat-rimmed and tall. Then a suit—chocolate coat, flowered kerseymere vest, and nankeen breeches—was exhibited to the crowd. Here the moths were unmistakable—a thick cluster fluttered blindly in the sunlight, and the buyers drew back with affected cries of alarm.

“They be only fit for guisers at Kirsmas time!” cried Mrs Fearnough. “Lawk-amercey, what guys lads used for to be !”

Nichols dangled the garments one by one from the end of his malacca cane.

“These,” he said, “must have been made for the happy day that never came. Very likely he showed them to his young lady—maybe she went with him to the tailor’s! Now, good friends, what offer for these—a buck’s suit of fifty years ago, worth putting into a museum?”

A wag bade sixpence, then silence followed ; as the hammer was about to fall, Miss Damm whispered shrilly, “One shilling,” and as nobody else had competed, the moth-eaten clothes and the box fell to her share. She repacked everything quickly, and waited for the next article. From a *papier-maché* tray covered with odds and ends Nichols selected a leather daguerrotype case and pressed the spring.

“Why, here he is, and here’s the wife who never was his wife!” he exclaimed. “Dear me, they make a loving couple! Standing side

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by side, and she's got a crinoline on, and big leg-o'-mutton sleeves! A pretty face like a rosebud — not a face to be slapped, that's certain. And look at his black stock and smooth, well-oiled hair!"

Miss Damm had flushed until all the blotches of her skin were invisible. The auctioneer's speech seemed a profanation; she lost command of herself, and stepping forward laid trembling hands on the portrait-case. It was damp, and rotten with age; the two sheets of glass left their embossed gilt frames and fell, breaking into fragments on the wall-coping.

"I couldna help it, mester," she gasped, as she realised the enormity of her offence. "I weere the wench whose face Nathan slapt!"

The man was not without feeling; he shook his head and passed to the next lot, making no further allusion to the bachelor's only courtship. Miss Damm wound her handkerchief about the handle of the box and dragged it slowly from the yard. Her cheeks were blubbered now, and nobody cared to jest.

"The linen I'll be laid out in," she muttered, as she crawled up the hill, "an' I'll burn t' oother things wi' my weddin'-gown. Poor lad, Nathan! Eigh me, they shanna laugh when my things be sowd!"

FOR OWD TIMES' SAKE

THE chamber where old Peter Brock lay was large and low-ceiled, with indigo-blue-washed walls. A fourpost bedstead, with an arched top, hung with stiffly starched dimity of rosebud-and-robin pattern, stood near the door. The gaffer lay very quietly on the flock mattress; his head, turned face upwards, scarce made a dint in the pillow. The counterpane was unruffled, and doubled over where it touched his beard. He had been helpless for some months, and Hannah's continual smoothing of the creases whenever he had turned had at last so wrought upon his conscience that he no longer stirred save when bidden. Even now, when the end was so near, he dared not disturb the rigid lines that she had marked with her thumbnail. He was a man of many friends, and since his paralytic seizure the sick-room had set an example of neatness to every Milton housekeeper.

He was scarce able to eat; but one kindly sympathiser had presented a basket of cunningly wrought samples of soap, designed to tempt the eye. It lay, a gorgeous vision of

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grapes and peaches and nectarines, on a wool mat in the centre of a polished round table, surrounded by two score of empty medicine bottles. He had ever been proud of his capacity for doctor's stuff, and his daughter had yielded to his entreaties that these trophies might not be removed. Moreover, said Hannah, cheerfully, if need be, their saving might prevent any dispute about the bill.

On the evening of his death, Mrs Barton came down from Mooredge with a little hamper of dainty food. Emma, his younger daughter, who was herself in her fortieth year, conducted her to the parlour that opened to the house-place. The spinster's face, blubbered with natural tears, told the old woman that Peter's time was come, and her own comfortable chin began to show signs of weakness. Peter and she had been school-mates, and their friendship had held good for more than half-a-century.

"Is he worsened?" she said, with a little gasp.

"Ay," replied Emma. "Doctor Hattersley says as belike the end'll coome at midnight. He's sufferin', poor soul—sufferin' so much as I canna bear to see him."

Mrs Barton opened her hamper and lifted out some jars.

"There's cawf's-foot jelly an' beef-tea," she said. "Dear Lord! to think as 'tis the last I'll

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e'er make for him! If yo' dunna mind, wench, I'd like to go upstairs."

"'Tis o' no use," said Emma, "he'll none know yo', I fear; but still, if yo' want, it canna do him ony harm. Coome this way."

She preceded the visitor up the wide staircase and led the way to Peter's chamber. Hannah, who was sitting by the bed, raised a lean forefinger to her lips.

"He's a bit easier now," she whispered; "dunna make a noise."

The sibilation wakened the old man; his eyes turned slowly towards the door. "Is—it—yo', M'ria?" he stammered.

The widow tiptoed forward and bent over the pillow. "Ay, Pete," she said, gently; "'tis me, an' sorry to the yeart to see yo' i' such a bad way."

A yellow hand crept over the counterpane. "Yo've—been—good to me, M'ria—very good—but I canna dee wi'out——"

She bent lower. "Hush, lad," she murmured, "worry about nowt. I know whatten yo' mean; now for God's sake dunna fret!"

He quietened wonderfully as her palm, light as a leaf, moved to and fro on his forehead; his eyes closed, his breath came with less rebellion. Hannah spoke peremptorily in a glance, and Mrs Barton moved to the door. As she lingered on the threshold, the gaffer spoke again:

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"'Tisna fair, M'ria—'tis—bad as stealin' if 'tisna paid!"

Mrs Barton retired with her handkerchief to her eyes; Peter spoke no more for a full hour. At nine o'clock Emma stole up to the chamber.

"Theere's 'Lizbeth Drabble downstairs," she said. "Hoo thought hoo'd best coome up, so as to be on the spot. I set her agate o' warmin' a cup o' beer for hersen."

Hannah went silently to a chest of drawers and took out a pair of linen sheets, and a white shirt and cotton stockings.

"They may as well be airin'," she remarked. "Give 'em to 'Lizbeth, an' yo' come back, for it looks as if poor feyther weere passing now."

Emma went away, to return presently with considerable reluctance—for she was of a timorous nature, and disposed to shun the serious things of life. Each woman had loved the gaffer in her own way, and the last hours were filled with melancholy reflections. Ever and anon Hannah leaned forward and moistened his lips with a feather dipped in brandy. It seemed as if he were about to depart without another word; but just before the end Hannah begged him to say something for them to remember him by, and the twitching lips grew firm for a few moments.

"Fifty pound," gasped Peter, "borrowed two year agoe. . . . M'ria 't weere . . . I

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ne'er said nowt—to anyone. . . . Yo' mun tell her—I've told yo'—it mun be paid."

Shortly afterwards, when all was over, and 'Lizbeth Drabble had been admitted to perform the offices by which she earned a scanty living, the two daughters retired to the parlour, mended the fire, and sat down for a hearty cry. When the first paroxysm was over, Hannah said that she was faint for want of food, having partaken of nothing since tea-time.

"Theere's Mrs Barton's jelly," faltered Emma. "Poor feyther'll ne'er eat it ony more."

"I canna chew jelly," said Hannah, tearfully. "Yo' can ha' it, if yo' want, but I be for bread an' cheese. I'll go to the pantry mysen."

From the floor above came the slow clattering of the old woman's shoes, as she moved from side to side of the bed. The sisters, as they ate and drank together, mentally followed their father's final toilet. After the meal, in which tears gave a salty flavour to their victuals, their spirits grew less burdensome, and they drew nearer the grate and lifted their petticoats so that their knees might warm, and talked of the funeral and the guests who must be invited. Brocks had always been buried festively, and the old man was vastly respected. When the day had been chosen, and the list of "bearers"

FOR OWD TIMES' SAKE

settled, Hannah saw for the first time Mrs Barton's jar of beef-tea. She opened the casement and flung the concoction into the garden.

"I dunna think we ought to mention it yet," she said, "seein' as he's but scarce cold; still I do think M'ria Barton's behaved traitrous."

"I couldna make it out," responded the less guileful Emma. "Poor feyther weere worritin' about——"

"Well!" exclaimed Hannah, "why, 'tis clear as the day. He lent her fifty pound, two year ago, an' I doubt he's gotten no receipt. An' yo' heerd him say as it mun be paid?"

"I did," said Emma, "an' I saw how bothered hoo looked! An' her a-coomin' wi' her jellies an' stuffs, just for to make him so as he'd forgie the debt. I e'er thought her deep—hoo'd ha' wedded him when mother deed, but for yo' stoppin' it."

Hannah nodded. "Do yo' rec'lect two years ago him bein' queer i' his mind—just afore Bakewell Fair? 'Tweere then as hoo had it, I dare sweer. . . . He always weere vexed to part wi' money."

"But if there's no paper, when we look i' his dask, how wilt go then?"

"Hoo shall pay every penny o't," said Hannah, "if we ha' to go to law wi' her. Here's 'Lizbeth, eh dear! eh dear! eh, dear! Coome upstairs, Em. Poor, poor feyther!"

FOR OWD TIMES' SAKE

Four full days passed before Peter was borne shoulder-high along the Dale, beneath a pomp of black pall with heavy white fringe, to the grave beside the lich-gate. Mrs Barton was, of course, present amongst the guests; but, to her amazement and distress, neither Hannah nor Emma deigned to notice her peculiar sorrow for the loss of her old friend. Since she had resolutely shunned any mention of the loan, her sympathetic advances were altogether slighted, and as they sat down to the burial tea, after the walk from the church, Hannah flouted her in the presence of all the company. Still she did not desist from her kindly attempts.

"I ne'er thought," said the dame, "as I'd be sittin' here on such a melinky occasion. Peter, God rest him! an' me is—or rather was—of an age; both bein' born on the night o' Pack-Rag Feast, sixty-eight years ago. . . . A bit onlucky wi' bad harvests, but he strove an' strove bravely."

"I reckoned," remarked Emma, ignoring the last words, "as yo' weere a lot owder nor him. Poor feyther—boo-hoo—he didna look more nor his years till he weere struck wi' the palsy."

One of the women tittered hysterically. Mrs Barton's colour rose, and she said nothing more. But Hannah, whose ire had been roused beyond endurance by the allusion to her father's unsuccessful farming, rose

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and glared with venomous eyes across the table.

"Feyther weere a good man, Missus Barton," she said, "a good, kind-yearted man. E'er wi' his hand i' his pocket, ready to lend fowk as wanted it—as *much as fifty pound!*"

Mrs Barton's colour faded again. "I'm sayin' nowt about money," she protested. "Theere weere nob'dy as respected him more nor I did. I'm sure I've felt his goin' as if he'd been one o' my own kin. . . . Ne'er a day but I came down to see him."

"Yo' did so," said Hannah, "but let's say no more about that. Only there were fowk as pettled about him at the last for motives o' theer own—a-tryin' to deedle him so as he'd forget to spëak o' money lent. Oh yes, I'm mentionin' no names; but I can see thro' a stöane wall as well as ony other ooman!"

The widow had pushed her chair aside; her lean, hard-worked hands were busy with her bonnet-strings. "'Twould be better for yo', Hannah Brock," she said, "if yo'd hold your tongue. Theere's limits to my patience. Peter weere a dear friend o' mine, an' 'tis onseemly to insult fowk at a mëal gi'en to honour him. If theere be onybody at this table as owed Peter money, why, then, God help 'em! for they'll ha' a wench hard as nails to deal wi'!"

Hannah realised at last that her anger had carried her too far; she rose and attempted

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to intercept Mrs Barton on her way to the door.

"I dunna want a scandal," she muttered, clutching a corner of the black cashmere shawl. "Prythee, sit yo' down, Mrs Barton, an' I'll hold my tongue for the present. We'll settle about the reckonin' afterwards."

"Take your grëat hands away!" cried Mrs Barton, in a choked voice. "I canna bear yo' touchin' me. I hadna meant for theere to be a reckonin'; but since yo' mun ha' it, yo' shall. I'd ha' been silent for Peter's sake; but human natyure canna bear such usage. An' I'll ne'er darken yor door again."

Although Hannah stood blocking the way, the widow thrust her aside with an angry movement of the arm, and went resolutely from the house. The guests at the table showed faces of great disapprobation, and being desirous of justifying herself, Hannah began hurriedly to explain.

"I'm none one as shoots wi'out bullets," she said. "Two year ago, feyther lent her fifty pound; an' e'er since he's been a bed-lier, hoo's coome wi' her jellies an' what not, hopin' to wheedle him into forgi'in the debt. An' his last words to her weere as it mun be paid, or 'twould be downright robbery. Hoo hushed him, for to stop him mentionin' it. Hoo knew how close poor feyther weere about tellin' us his business."

An elderly farmer rose and thrust back his

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chair as abruptly as Mrs Barton had done. "I've always held as Missus Barton weere a honest an' God-fearin' ooman," he said gravely, "an' I dunna like fool's-talk at such a time. I reckon yo'll be 'shamed o' yorsen to-morrow, or I'd tell yo' a bit o' my mind. M'ria weere ne'er one to take advantage, by'r Leddy! 'twere usually t'other way about."

He took his hat from the side-table. "I consider yo've used her cruel," he added, "an' there's none at the table as'll quarrel wi' me for tellin' yo' so. I wish yo' an' yor fifty pound luck, an' I think yo've fouled Peter's memory."

Then he tramped away, and the other guests, vastly uncomfortable, gulped down the remainder of the food in silence, and returned to their homes. The sisters sat weeping for some time after the last was gone; then Hannah brought forth several strenuous reasons for her candour. She knew, however, that the plain-speaking had prejudiced her with her neighbours, and her righteous indignation against the widow only increased.

"Tell yo' whatten, Em," she said at last, "I'll go an' look thro' poor feyther's papers now, tho' I doubt there'll be no mention o' the debt. Ne'ertheless, he said it, an' it mun be gathered in. Yo' may as well set to washin' up the pots, wench; if yo' havena

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finished when I coome down, I'll help yo'."

She took a candle and went up to the chamber; a few more tears flowed when she beheld the oblong outline in the middle of the bed. She unlocked the desk where Peter had kept his private papers, and began to search for the bond. As she had feared, she found nothing relating to monetary transactions with Mrs Barton; but her amazement was great to come across a yellow bundle of love-letters, written in an uncouth hand, and dated almost fifty years before, and signed "Maria."

"Generous he weere!" she sighed. "Kind-yearated as a babby! I used for to ha' my thoughts as they coorted i' youth, for moother could ne'er abide her. . . . An' 'cause they weere owd sweetyearts he lent her the money wi'out a scrap o' receipt."

She read the letters one by one, her narrow mouth pouting derisively. "Deary me!" she said, when she had torn the last two pieces, "hoo weere warm i' her feelin's! I s'pose feyther weere forced to refuse her. An' for her, after callin' him loove an' darlin', to coome a-borrowin' money i' his owd age!"

She went downstairs, after she had made sure that Emma had finished her task. They began to talk of the future: their father's will, made many years ago, gave them equal shares in the little farm.

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"We'll just go on as afore," said Hannah, "but only we shall be a bit better-to-do. Feyther had his failin's, theere'll be no yale-house work to pay for. The club-money covers the burial expenses, an' the forty-five pound insurance mun stop i' the bank for a nest-egg. Why, bless me, wi' Mrs Barton's fifty, theere'll be well-nigh a hunnerd! I declare, if we sell the owd mare, theere'll be five pound for her."

"Ay," interrupted Emma, "but had we better? Feyther said as hoo shouldna be sowd whilst he lived."

"He didna say owt about after," said Hannah. "Hoo's twenty-six year, an' no use for leadin'. We mun ha' a new tit; Missus Barton's money'll buy that, an' a new cart, an' a heifer or two."

Ere they retired they had made up their minds to visit Mooredge on the following afternoon and formally request an early settlement. So at the appointed time they climbed the hillside and reached the small house where the widow lived. She had seen them approach, and she was waiting at the door.

"I reckon yo've coome to excuse yorsen, Hannah Brock," she said, very coldly. "I weere ne'er so bedone i' my life. But for decency's sake yo'd ha' heerd some truths yesterday."

"We've coome to settle about that money,"

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replied Hannah. "We want no more to do wi' yo'!"

Mrs Barton's face grew somewhat kinder. "I s'pose yo've found a paper or summat," she said. "Theere's no call to worry; I didna mean to bother wi' it. Yor feyther an' me weere lad an' lass together."

"Yo' weere," said Hannah. "I've been readin' yor letters to him, writ when yo' weere livin' wi' yor nuncle at Derby—nay, such soft stuff! Lucky for him as he didna wed yo'!"

The widow led the way into her parlour, and with a gesture bade the two black-garbed spinsters sit on the most uncomfortable chairs.

"Yo're a bit loose i' the tongue, Hannah Brock," she said, quietly. "Peter'ld ha' married me twenty times ower but for mischief as weere bred betwixt us by yor moother. Hoo looved him, too, so I canna blame her."

Hannah's cheeks turned pale green. "Yo' let my moother be!" she snarled, striking the polished card-table fiercely with her fist. "Let's settle—I wunna stay i' yor house one——"

"Yo'll none wish, I fancy," said Mrs Barton. "Ay, I'll settle."

She unlocked a drawer of her secretary and took out a scrap of paper. "Here's the note," she explained. "He'd to find fifty

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pound for the sheep breakin' into the Duke's plantin', an' destroyin' young firs. If he hadna borrowed it o' me, he'd ha' had to raise it on the land."

Peter's daughters curved their bodies and out-thrust their peaked chins.

"Whatten?" they shrieked.

"Fifty pound as I lent him for owd times' sake. I meant ne'er to ask for it; if yo' hadna been such brutes I'd ha' burned the writin'. An' now, since Peter said it mun be paid, I mean to call it in wi'in a week. Yo'll hear fro' Lawyer Watkins about it—I'm goin' to see him to-morrow."

She held open the parlour door. "I'm sorry," she said; "but 'tis yor own doin'. Now yo' may go."

A VAIN SELF-SACRIFICE

BEYOND the church, near where the road widens before a little court of eighteenth-century cottages, one may see a long shop-window, mullioned and lozenged, behind which, in a dim greenish light, stand several shelves of cheap hardware and gaudy pottery. In the very middle, a clay pipe is propped against a sour, wrinkled orange, and a box of penny cigars depends from two loops of red tape that are hooked to the ceiling. The inscription on the lintel says: *Reuben Lowe, Licensed to deal in Tobacco and Snuff*, and throughout the daytime anyone who passes may catch a glimpse of the proprietor, through the open hatchway, busily dusting his wares, or attending officiously to customers.

A shrewd old man is Reuben, clean-shaved, grey-skinned, stunted, and club-footed. He is not a native of Milton, but of the Brig, a small village on the west bank of the Darrand. Brig folk are accounted the most grasping of the Peaklanders; there is a saying that when they sleep the fingers of either hand open and twitch together as if they continually clutched

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something tangible and valuable. It was a Brig innkeeper who won local fame by converting cheese-rind into Welsh-rabbit. Despite their greediness, however, Brig-folk are supremely honest, and not ungenerous when uncostly help is in question.

This afternoon the man was in some distress of mind, because his old friend and best customer, Mrs Furness of the Clough had not made her appearance to purchase her weekly pound of tea. To ease his impatience, he took from the shelf a dog's-eared account book, and turned to the pages that bore her name. Since he had become agent for the *Golden Present Tea Company*, a benevolent firm that gave with every packet a coupon for some article of household plenishing, Sarah had patronised him more than any other woman in the neighbourhood. Her husband was a well-to-do farmer in a small way; but he had been born at the Brig, and of all its sons he was the most parsimonious, and the good woman had delighted in acquiring plates and glasses and cups and saucers without calling upon him for the money.

It is true that the tea was not of the quality to which she had been accustomed before Reuben became servant of the *Company*. The decoction was bitter; after it had stood for a short while on the hob, it grew thick, and almost black of hue. But she trained herself to swallow it; and now, in

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the third year, she herself consumed a full pound every week, instead of the four ounces which had sufficed before the benevolence of the *Company* had been lavished upon Milton.

“’Tis mēat an’ drink to me,” she would say to her spouse. “I want nowt fro’ day to night but bread an’ butter an’ the brown-pot. An’ if they be fools enew to gie me handsome dishes an’ things, why, let ’em, that’s whatten I say.”

Furness never drank tea: he had been reared on beef and small beer, and to-day beef and small beer were still his principal food. He was a lusty old fellow, red-visaged and stalwart. Sarah, until she had fallen into the tea-habit, had been equally hearty, but now she was thin and yellow and sickly, and her mind was given to melancholy humours. Still, she was vastly proud, for was not her house-place full of beautiful things? The shelves of her dresser bore plates of exotic pattern; the dresser itself was embellished with round sheepskin mats, tinged from pink to crimson; an alarum-clock of brilliant nickel-plate stood on the mantel-shelf. Her parlour, too, contained oleographs on the blue-washed walls—oleographs of rare colouring, framed in ornate gilt; a metal paraffin stove nestled inside the lacquered fender; a white glass lamp surmounted the Bible on the centre table.

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The shopkeeper climbed the hill sometimes in response to her request that he should see how magnificent everything looked. He admired to her heart's content, for she had set an excellent example to the villagers; nevertheless, he always took leave when she spoke of "setting on" the kettle, and preparing for him a cup of her favourite beverage.

It was four o'clock and she had not arrived; never before had he known her to be so late. And only yesterday an important package had arrived, and he was childishly desirous of hearing her outspoken pleasure at the sight of her latest acquisition. He licked his thumb and turned the pages of his book, counting the entries made in his straggling handwriting. During the last quarter she had excelled herself; coupons of seventeen pounds stood to her credit; one more pound, and the handsomest prize he had ever arranged for would be delivered at her house.

"The owd ooman's cert'nly badly," he muttered, "for I know hoo weere as anxious as hoo could be. . . . Eh dear! spëak o' angels—theere hoo is i' the muck-cart wi' Job Slack a-drivin' her. My word, but hoo does look bad!"

A hairy-legged horse halted afront the door-hatch, and a red-haired lad clumsily assisted the woman to alight. She came tottering into the shop, for all the world like a sackful of living bones.

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"We'll go to the back-room, Reuben," she said feebly. "I'm none at all well, an' I want a bit o' private talk wi' yo!"

She reeled slightly; he put his hands under her arms and pushed her forward through the inner doorway to a big chair that stood beside the hearth. She moved her head from side to side, as if to make sure that nobody else was present.

"Reuben," she said at last, drawing from her pocket a piece of folded newspaper, which being opened disclosed a half-crown, "Reuben, I've coome to say as yo're goin' to lose yor best customer. . . . This is the last pound o' tea I shall buy i' the world!"

"Lord!" exclaimed the man, "yo're none so bad as that! There's many a long year afore yo' yet!"

She closed her eyes very wearily, and dropped the money in her lap. "'Tis no use saying ootherwise, Reuben," she said, bravely, "for I know as 'tis God's truth. 'Tisna wi' so much tea-drinkin', Reuben, mind that—'tis summat else as has done it. . . . The doctor says as 'tis tea-drinkin', but I know he's wrong. . . . Ha' yo' gotten the dinner-set for me?"

"Ay," he said, moving with alacrity to the shop, for the dame's demeanour was very discomposing. "I havena opened the hamper, but I can do so i' a minute. Carrier Cowper brought it fro' the station this very morn."

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He untied the strings of the wicker lid, and after carefully removing the straw, brought to light one by one the various pieces of a stoneware dinner service. Mrs Furness watched him arranging them upon the round table; occasionally she bent forward and pursing her lips examined very carefully any flaws upon the enamel, or beat with her knuckles such articles as she feared might be cracked. When all were in sight, she sank back in her chair and eyed the display very curiously.

"'Tis a pratty pattron," she observed. "Them birds—swallows they be, fro' theer shape—a-peekin' butterflies is very true, to my thinkin'. An' theere isna owt i' the way o' dinner dishes up a' whöame, save such as Mester Furness heired fro' his mother. Those be cracked, an' bodged wi' tape an' white lëad. . . . Reuben, if all had gone on well, these'd ha' been used at my fun'ral!"

"Why," he exclaimed, "yo're none dëad yet, nor like to be, I do trust!"

"'Tis whatten I want to be, onyhow," she sighed. "Reuben, I do b'lieve as my yeart's bruk' clean i' two!"

Then she lifted a corner of her shawl to her eyes and began to whimper.

Reuben moved to and fro in bewilderment; for, being a bachelor, he had little knowledge of how to treat an ailing, troubled woman. Suddenly he remembered having read that the

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sex regarded a cup of tea as a panacea for depression; he stirred his fire and set the copper kettle on the flame, regardless of its brightness disappearing behind a cloak of soot. But Mrs Furness, after making a choking sound in her throat, rose and laid a delaying hand on his arm.

"No more o' that tea!" she cried hoarsely. "I couldna sup anooother drop to save my life!"

"I weerena goin' to gie yo' that as yo' buy," he stammered. "I've ne'er been i' the way o' takin' it, bein' used to green, as 'tweere, so to speak."

"Happen I *can* manage a cup, then," she said; "but I b'lieve if I weere to savour that as I bought, I'd dee the next minute! Yo' see I've been such a great tea-drinker—an' all on account o' th' prizes as I got. 'Tweerena as I looved it: but it got hold o' me, an' made me a slave to the pot."

For a brief while she was silent; but when he had poured out a cupful and she had gulped down a great draught, the floodgate of her confidence was opened, and she began to tell her woes in a high, shrill voice. The hectic colour deepened on her face; drops of perspiration oozed from her forehead.

"I dunna care who knows, Reuben," she said, "an' I mēan to tell yo' all. Mester Furness has been a miser e'er since I wedded him, an' afoore that, I make no doubt. An'

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I've been his wife for forty year now, an' ne'er i' all that time has he spent a penny i' buyin' things for the house, tho' I used for to beg an' pray. . . . I wore his mother's owd clöathes, an' her mother's too, an' I've ne'er had owt to spend private on mysen. So, Reuben, lad, yo' may judge how glad I weere when them good fowk began a-givin' the presents. An' after the first jug I'd gotten i' that fashion, it took possession o' me as I mun get all I wanted wi' the tea. So I drank more an' more, an' tho' Mester Furness grum'led, he couldna well say me nay.

"Yo' see, Reuben, I've been brëakin' up for some months (tea-drinkin' may ha' wëakened me a bit), an' last Saturday I weere that queer as I had to stop i' bed, an' Mester Furness brought Liz Barker from Grassbrook to look to the house for a day or two. I ne'er liked the hussy—I've more nor once jealoused as he fancied her. . . . An' that night I woke at twelve o'clock, an' wi' him none bein' aside o' me i' the bed, an' voices soundin' downsteers, I gets up, dons my shawl, an' creeps o' tiptoe to wheere they weere. . . . I' the parlour, if yo'll b'lieve me, an' he weere showing her all the things I'd gathered!

"'Ay, the owd lass canna last long,' says my mester, 'an' all these grand articles 'll be yors, for I shanna wait three month afore yo' an' me be man an' wife!' Liz, hoo giggles. 'Tis a lovely spot,' hoo says. 'I'll be proud o'

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whatten hoo's chose. I ne'er thought I'd be so grateful.'

"They moved to the door, an' I crawled back to bed, an' when Mester Furness did coome, I said nowt, but pretended to be fast asleep. But 'tis God's truth as my yeart's smashed clean i' two."

She rose from her chair. "Job'll be tired o' waitin'," she said, "so I mun go. Reuben, yo'll put the dinner-set at the back o' the cart. Good-bye, lad, if I dunna see yo' again, yo'll none forget whatten I've towld."

After he had replaced the pots and lifted the hamper into the vehicle, she caught his sleeve and drew him back into the shop.

"I've made up my mind to do summat," she said, vindictively. "As soon as I get whöame an' he goes out to see his Liz, I'll take a hammer an' smash every prize I've gotten. Yon wratch shall ne'er ha' owt I've addled!"

THE LOST PRIZES

JABEZ REDFERN had courted Mrs Bowers ever since her husband had died of a chill, caught at the rejoicing of the late Queen's first Jubilee. Ephraim had assisted at the lighting of the beacon on Milton Edge, and, overcome with heavy draughts of home-brewed, had spent the night amongst the heather. One day he was a lusty middle-aged man, the next, a rheumatical, sneezing dotterel. The duties of parish clerk and sexton devolved for a while upon his wife—unaided she dug three graves in the churchyard; then, as his illness became serious, a successor filled the posts. Ephraim Bowers lingered for only three weeks.

Milton folk are great exhibitors at Darrand Show, and for many years the sexton had always won the first prize for potatoes. His garden was sandy; and he had the secret of a marvellous top-dressing, which, according to his enemies, was made of ground human bones. This secret in his last hours he revealed to his wife, who received it under a promise to tell nobody else; and that same

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year she strove against the grief of her loneliness and achieved as great a success as he had ever known. After that, every summer, more magnificent potatoes lay in honour on a side-table of the vegetable-marquee, and the widow became famous as a specialist in their culture. She was exceedingly proud of her success; as proud, indeed, as her neighbour, Jabez Redfern, was of his delicate strain of Sebright bantams, which had been so carefully inbred that at the last only a young cockerel and a pullet survived chickenhood. This race of bantams (inherited by Jabez from his father) had always won an excellent award at Darrand Show. They were dainty little red-spotted birds, with haughtily-carried heads, and tails perked upward till they almost touched the combs. They never reached any great age, but invariably wasted away and died in their second year — not, however, before the retired cobbler had cultivated their instincts so that they obeyed his every gesture. It was pretty to watch them, summoned by his faint whistle, flutter up to his shoulders and roost there, one on either side, whilst he smoked and read his daily newspaper in the garden or by the house-place fire.

Mrs Bowers affected contempt—the bantams' eggs (when there were any) were no bigger than marbles, and incalculable mischief was wrought by their scratching amongst the gaffer's vegetables. It was because of his

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dread lest they might uproot something in her garden that he fixed wire-netting around his own; and the good woman, in her more kindly moments, poked dainties, such as dead beetles and crickets, through the mesh.

Every evening he spent an hour in her company, talking of old and recent times. Each had a little property in the Nether End of the village, and their chief stories concerned the tenants past and present. Jabez attended in person to the repairs, accepting no return from Mrs Bowers save her heartily expressed thanks, and since her husband's death she had not expended one penny on labour. She used to go down sometimes to watch him mending the roofs or painting the windows and doors; when the job was done, she would share with him a quart of small beer, and with his feet resting on her fender he would quaver old songs about love in spring-time.

He was timorous by nature—year by year he deferred putting the momentous question. She used many womanly arts to stimulate him, and sometimes, after he had retired, she would weep bitter tears because of her failure. At last, however, she determined to arouse his jealousy, and began to decoy to her house a younger man, Elias Wilks, of the “Newburgh Arms,” upon whom her blandishments had a very successful effect. After the first meeting of the rivals, in her house-

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place, the widow grew sprucer in her attire, and took to wearing in the evenings an old lavender silk gown and a lace cap. As time passed, Elias visited her as frequently as Jabez, and the two men smoked in silence, whilst she, dismissing all mention of her property, told them of the love-successes of her girlhood.

And so it went on till a short time before this year's Darrand Show, for which Mrs Bowers, excelling all her past successes, grew a red potato as large as a middle-sized vegetable marrow, and Jabez reared the daintiest pair of bantams that he had ever seen. Certain signs of late had shown him that the widow was turning towards Elias; and at last, in the exultation aroused by the knowledge that they were to win a great triumph, he made up his mind to relinquish his bachelorhood. So one evening he donned his Sunday clothes, and stuck a pink aster in his button-hole, before paying his customary visit. Somewhat to his chagrin, Elias had arrived first, and the widow was giggling very merrily as he entered.

"Coomer an' sit yo' down, Jabez," she said. "Mester Wilks has just been praisin' the 'tater. See, 'tis here on the table—i' all my life I ne'er drëamed o' such a one! An' wi' a skin red an' soft as a new-born babby's, hee-hee!"

He examined the wonderful tuber. "Seems

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to me as the prize should be doubled," he said. "Lord! Sarah, 'tis grand to look upon!"

She eyed him rather wistfully. "An' yor banties are just loovely," she said. "Nay, yo've gotten 'em to perfection this year! They're so vally'ble (bein' the last o' the kind i' the coountry), as I'm surprised yo'll let 'em go to the Show."

"Ay," he replied, "I'm a bit nervous—the breed's dyin' out at last; but the ruby spots ha' coome as true as guineas i' this pair. They've been a lot o' trouble; but I dunna begrudge it. None as the prize is worth much—'tis the honour o' ha'in' the only Sebrights o' the kind i' all the land."

Mrs Bowers nodded absently, and resumed her conversation concerning the prize vegetable with Elias. Jabez sat glowering; but did not speak until the clock struck ten and the landlord rose to depart.

"Good - night to both o' yo'," said Mrs Bowers. "I reckon we'll all meet again to-morrow?"

Jabez did not move from his chair. "I've gotten a question to ask yo', when yo're alöane," he said bravely. "It concerns us an' nob'dy else, so I'll wait till Mester Wilks takes his læave."

The widow accompanied Elias to the garden; Jabez coloured as he heard their muffled laughter. When she returned, she carried the potato into the pantry, where

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she placed it very carefully in a blue willow-pattern bowl on the window-sill. The old man watched her through the open doorway. She tripped back to the house-place, and going on her knees before the fire, began to stir the cinders from the grate.

"I said as I'd gotten summat to ask yo', Sarah," he said; "but yo've a way o' coolin' me off."

Mrs Bowers yawned ostentatiously. "Well," she said, "I've a notion whatten 'tis; but I may as well stop yo' makin' a fool o' yorsen. Yo' should ha' asked that question years an' years ago, 'stëad o' lettin' anoother chap do it. Mester Wilks, he put it to me, an' we're to be wedded i' a month. The 'Newburgh Arms' wants a ooman, and a ooman wants to be at the 'Newburgh Arms'!"

Jabez rose from his chair and stood trembling in the midst of the hearth-rug. "Then yo' mëan to tell me, when I've coorted yo' for so long, as I'm to be chucked ower?" he cried. "Chucked ower for that filthy owd spindle-legs!"

"No names!" she exclaimed angrily. "No names! I'll put up wi' no nonsense. I ne'er promised yo'. Mester Wilks's a comelier man nor yo' weere i' yor prime! Be off an' lëave me alöane—I've gotten nowt to say to yo'!"

He marched to the door; but turned there with clenched fists. "'Tis a dirty trick, Sarah," he said sullenly. "A dirty trick; but mind

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yo' arena paid out. Spit i' the air, said my feyther, an' 'twill fall on yor own yead!"

Mrs Bowers muttered a sour retort, which he did not wait to acknowledge; but left the house very hastily, and soon was seated before his own fire, hatching a suitable penalty for her offence. He did not go to rest that night, and before dawn crept out across his garden and took his bantams from their coop. Then he passed in silence to the window of Mrs Bowers' pantry, and opening it placed the birds gently on the inner sill. In another minute both were pecking lustily at the prize potato, marring its comeliness and scattering fragments all over the stone.

All would have gone well had not the cock crowed joyously at the sight of the damage they had done. And Jabez whistled for them to return; but before they had time to obey the summons, a stout, night-capped and grey-gowned figure appeared at the door, and a wild cry resounded through the morning air, then a strong hand forced down the zinc window, and Jabez saw no more, but, terror-stricken, flew back to his own home.

It was the most miserable day of his life. Not until night-time dared he venture again out of doors. He had sat through the long hours beside the dead fire, his face covered with his hands. At last, at his usual hour of visiting Mrs Bowers, he summoned up his courage and tottered to her cottage.

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She met him at the door; there was no resentment in her countenance—nought but a comfortable satisfaction. He caught sight of the landlord, smoking a meerschaum pipe that had belonged to the sexton; but even this did not excite him to anger.

“Sarah,” he groaned, “I beg yo’ to forgie me—I weere mad—I acted like a fool! Let me ha’ my poor banties again?”

“Ay,” she replied, calmly, “I’ve no objections. I got ’em ready just a while back. Good banties, yors.”

She went to the mantelpiece. A deadly fear woke in his heart. She came back and dropped two tiny merry-thoughts into his outstretched hand, and then shut the door in his face.

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AFTER supper, Mrs Wheat opened her tortoiseshell snuff-box and took a large pinch. Then, lifting from her lap a folded handkerchief with a mourning border, she dusted her upper lip very carefully, and leaned back against the plump cushions of her green baize-covered arm-chair. She was a stout, well-favoured woman of forty-five, fair-skinned, with two rows of nut-brown ringlets, and little almond-shaped clear blue eyes. Her black mantle and bonnet had been carefully laid on the settle; on the table near the window lay a prayer-book and a neatly-folded umbrella. It was evident that she had been to church; she had not even troubled to change her new gown of dove-coloured silk. During the walk homeward along the limestone road that divides the Kettle woods, she had spoken with some acrimony to her companion concerning the parson's text, and now that they sat (the twilight deepening) in her best parlour, she reverted to the subject.

"Nay, Marcus," she said, "I canna think he weere justified. If a wise ooman he hath

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none seen, why then, 'tis callin' hissen fool or summat worse! Parson's been wed thrice, an' there's talk o' him choosin' another, so if he hasna seen one o' my sect wi' wisdom—but I've no patience! Well, so be it—happen no wise ooman'ld look at him."

Marcus Blackwall giggled shrewdly. He was a slender bachelor of the widow's own age, of a lesser stature, and endowed with the aspect of a kindly weasel. Bristling red whiskers sprang from either cheek, but his chin and throat were cleanly-shaven. A long gold chain hung around his neck, in the old fashion; attached to its clasp was an often-displayed pinchbeck watch in a shagreen case. As they had passed through the garden he had furtively plucked a spray of lad's-love—just now he was twiddling it in his fingers.

"Heaven be thanked!" he said, when his giggle was finally suppressed. "He mun ha' been blind when yo' passed that way, Ruth."

She smiled delightedly at the compliment. "What a tongue yo've gotten, Marcus!" she cried. "Yo' know the words as'll set a ooman satisfied wi' hersen! Theree weere ne'er such a lad for flatt'ry! Now, take t'oother easy-chair—that poor Yeb used—an' make yorsen coomfortable."

Marcus obeyed with alacrity, for the old spinning-stool which he had chosen was perilously weak in the legs. He sat for a while in silence, looking around on the handsome

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furniture and the coloured engravings of farm-house life. He was wondering if the widow could tear herself from her luxurious environment to live in one equally luxurious at his home in North Staffordshire, thirty miles away. They had been great friends in early life, and since Mr Wheat's death he had realised that, as his old mother was paralysed, no housekeeper would suit him so well as Ruth. For a reasonable excuse to visit her, some months ago he had bought the Grassbrook corn-mill, and had discovered frequent occasion to drive over with instructions to the man whom he had installed there.

As he wondered, he drew from his pocket a moleskin tobacco-pouch and a well-coloured meerschaum with an amber mouthpiece. Mrs Wheat's gaze was downcast; she did not look up until a slight cloud floated before her face. He had twisted a piece of paper, had held it between the bars and lighted the bowl in silence. Her colour rose and her narrow eyes sparkled with vexation. She had always been a hater of tobacco; never before in her recollection had the baneful odour tainted her best parlour. Yeb had often declaimed against the vile habit (like herself he was a confirmed snuff-taker), and powerful advice had been given by each to young folk against the pernicious results of smoking. Strange to say, until this moment she had been unaware of Marcus's subjection to the weed; for never

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before had he felt so certain of her good graces as to set himself entirely at ease.

She began to cough very violently, as if she were choking; a less enamoured man might have fancied that the paroxysm was feigned. He rose hastily, laid down his pipe, and began to pat her between the shoulders. But she coughed on until her throat was sore and the tears ran down her cheek.

"'Tis the bacca as did it," she gasped, at last. "Nay, plëase dunna stop smöakin': I'll happen get the better o't. But—hieu-hieu—it tickles my thröat so as I can scarce brëathe!"

She did not recover until, instructed by her broken words, he opened the door of a highly-polished corner-cupboard, and took out a green flask half filled with elderberry syrup. When she had sipped a wineglassful, she again plaintively desired Marcus to resume his smoking, and he was unwise enough to take her at her word; but this time sat closer to the mantelpiece, and sent the fumes up the chimney.

"I'm goin' back to Dove Dale i' the morn," he said, hesitatingly; "an' I thought I'd like to ha' a few particular words wi' yo' to-night. Yo' see, Ruth, my owd mother is oneasy i' her mind—hoo holds that no house is kep' i' proper order wheere theere isna a missus to look after it."

"Ay," said Mrs Wheat, "that's truth. The long an' the short o't is, Marcus—yo' mun set

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about lookin' for a wife. Yo've lived single long enew."

She clicked the lid of her snuff-box sharply and took another pinch; in her excitement she forgot to remove the dust from her upper lip, so that it seemed as if an auburn moustache budded there. In spite of his sincere affection, the sight of her altered appearance gave him a certain revulsion. He averted his face as he replied, and looked into the heart of the fire.

"I weere wonderin' if yo' could be persuaded to be that missus," he said; "there's none I fancy as I fancy yo', an' I make no doubt as I can warrant yor happiness. I'm a warm man—my money grows every year—yo' needna fear to lose owt i' that way. I shanna want a penny o' yor'n. Yo'll keep it as now, i' yor own possession."

He groped for her hand; the widow's chin was trembling as it was wont to tremble under great emotion. The last time it had been affected in that way was when Yeb Wheat lay dying. Marcus did not, however, remove his gaze from the grate.

"Yo've done me a great honour, lad," she murmured, "an' I thank yo' kindly. I thought yo'd ask me, an' I made up my mind to say 'Yes.' But I didna know as yo' weere such a slave to smöakin', Marcus, an' 'tis a heavy hour for me when I find that out."

"Well, well," cried Marcus, "there's surely

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no sin i' that! I'm none gi'en to it save at nights after supper, when I'm i' good coomp'ny."

"Is't a habit yo' can break off?" she asked eagerly. "Yeb, he ne'er practised it—he taught me as 'tweere the filthiest trick under creation. If yo' canna gie ower——"

"We've both gotten filthy tricks, then!" exclaimed Marcus, warmly. "To my thinkin', snuff-takin's far worse nor smöakin'. Oh, ay, I can gie ower, if yo' can do the same wi' snuff."

"Snuff?" she cried. "Why, Marcus, no reasonable man can ha' the læast objection to snuff! It has run i' our family for more nor a hunnerd year; men an' oomen alike ha' taken it. Snuff clears the brain an' the eyesight—my feyther used for to say as 'tweere takin' snuff as helped him to make his fortune. Sithee, on the lid o' the box is writ my grëat-gran'mother's name an' the date o' her weddin'!"

She passed the box with trembling fingers; he handled it very gingerly, and instead of returning it to her keeping, laid it heedlessly on the shining seat of the spinning-stool.

"I dunna say as I couldna be happy wi' yo', lad," she continued; "for I've growed fond o' yo', an' we weere lad an lass together afore I made up wi' Yeb. But this I do sweer—if yo've gotten i' the bacca habit so as yo' canna

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stop, why then, yo' an' me can ne'er be house-mates."

"I'm willin'," said Marcus, shortly,—“I'm willin' to gie up mine if yo'll gie up yor'n. That's all I've gotten to say, an' it strikes me as 'tis a fair bargain. Now I mun be off; I'll coome ower next Sunday, an' we'll settle matters then."

He was so disturbed that he took leave without shaking hands, and in place of his pipe and tobacco-pouch slipped into his pocket her heirloom snuff-box. When he was gone, the widow drew up her skirts so that her knees might be thoroughly warmed before going bedward, and then she began to cry gently. Never until now had she realised how attached she had grown to her suitor; indeed, the feeling he had aroused was as powerful as that she had experienced for Yeb himself in the heyday of courtship. When the fountain of her tears was exhausted, she rose to refresh herself with the maligned snuff, and found to her intense mortification that the box had disappeared. Unfortunately, moreover, she had no other snuff in the house, and as it was Sunday night it would be useless to send one of the farm lads to the village store. She retired to bed, and missed painfully the last pinch she was accustomed to take after her devotions. Sleep would not be wooed—the god resolutely ignored her advances—and after hearing the sheep's-head

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clock strike three, she went down again to the parlour, in the vain hope of finding the box somewhere on the floor. The fire was not yet burned out; she poked it into a blaze, and, holding the candle in one hand, groped all over the carpet. The excitement of the last few hours had sharpened her faculties in an odd fashion. She began gradually to understand that Marcus's love of tobacco might be as important as her love of snuff. She sat once more in the green arm-chair (this time attired in nightgown, scarlet shawl and felt slippers), and wondered—wondered. Finally she rose guiltily, and took Marcus's pipe and filled it with tobacco, which she lighted with a red-hot cinder. She suppressed a few natural qualms, and soon was puffing as lustily as any gaffer.

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Much to her consternation, Marcus did not attend church on the following Sunday evening. When she returned home, however, she found him waiting in the best parlour. He greeted her cordially, reading a hearty welcome in her reception. Before he would sit down again, she went to her corner cupboard and took out his meerschaum pipe and tobacco-pouch.

"I've to ask yor pardon," she said, humbly. "Smöake as much as yo' like—I'm more nor willin'."

"Dear Lord!" he ejaculated. "I made a

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solemn vow ne'er to smöake again—took my Bible öath i' earnest. Yo' proved to me as snuff-takin' weere better, an' I've fallen to that wi' all my yeart."

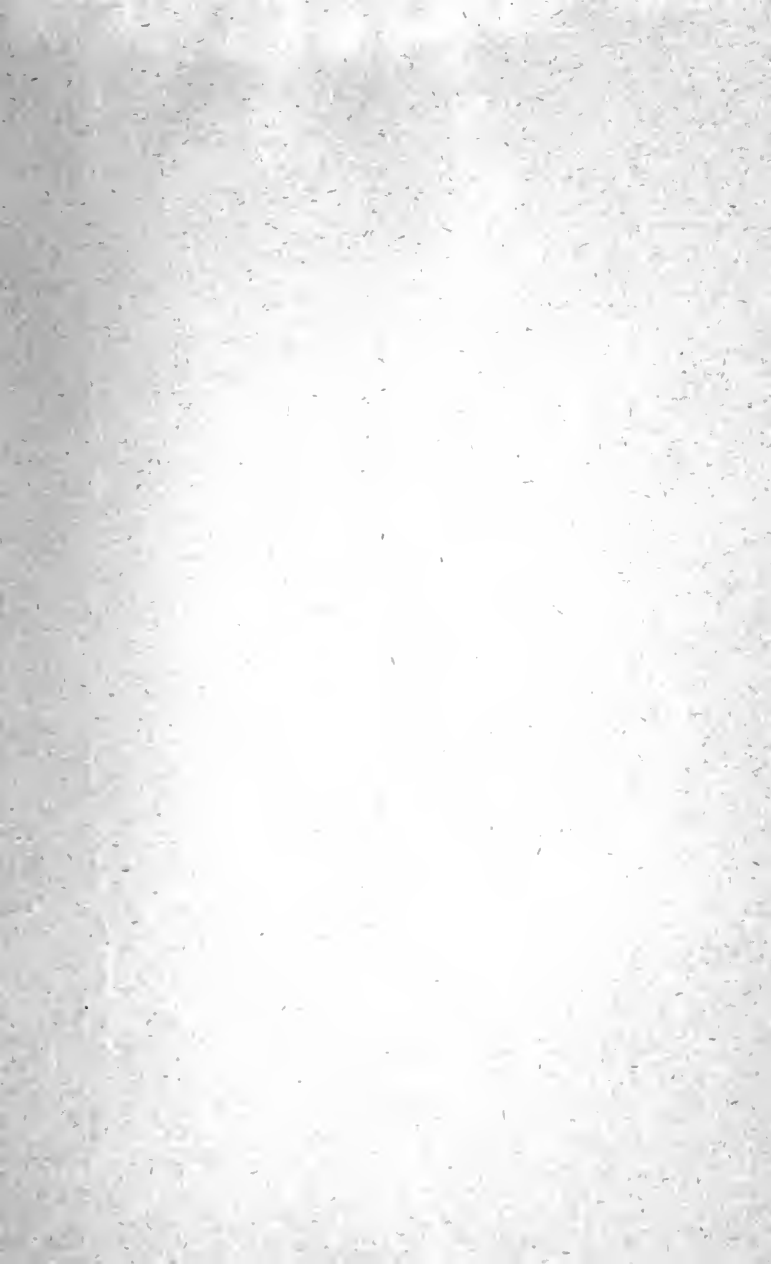
The poor widow's head had fallen back; her hands were uplifted; she had grown dizzy and faint of a sudden.

"Mercy upo' us all!" she said, in a husky voice. "I did the same about snuff, an', to plëase yo', chose tobacco in its place!"

A long silence followed; then Marcus, with a heavy sigh, put his arm around her waist.

"Whatten mun be, mun be," he said, not without bitterness. "I reckon I'd liefer things had been left as they weere!"





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